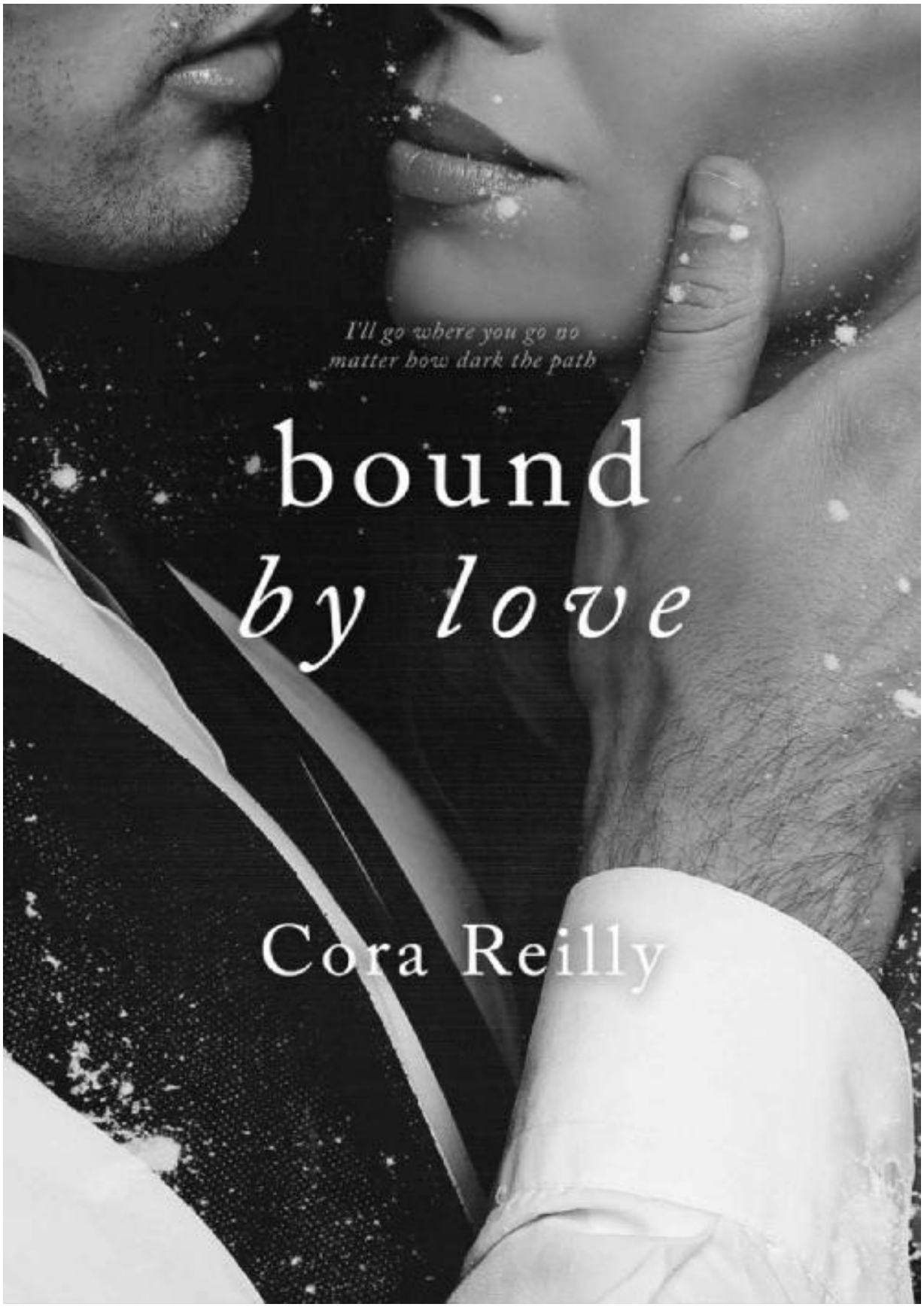
BOUND BY
LOVE
Can their love survive
in a world of betrayal and death?
Cora Reilly


I'll go where you go no matter how dark the path
bound
by love
Cora Reilly

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contents

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
About the Author

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prologue

ARIA

I can’t do this, Aria. *I want out. Out of this world. Out of my arranged marriage. Just out.*

Those words spoken by my sister Gianna started it all. They led to my first betrayal of Luca. I didn’t see it as a betrayal back then. I only wanted to help her, not betray my husband.

Yet, when I made the decision to help her escape, I knew I’d have to go against him.

Betrayal.

Made Men were always so quick to call any word of objection betrayal. Women were supposed to take their husband’s word as law, especially I, who was married to the Capo.

But protecting my family, my *sisters* and my *brother*, protecting those I loved against the harsh realities of mob life sometimes made it hard to obey.

I thought Luca would understand, thought our love could brave anything.

Luca wasn’t a man who had ever allowed himself to trust or love anyone—until me. Maybe he’d always been wary of his emotions.

Maybe he’d always waited for something that would prove his wariness right.

And I had given it to him.

LUCA

Matteo and I had been taught many lessons by our sadist of a father, all of them meant to make us strong and ruthless for the tasks expected of us. I hated the man, had hated him all my life, and hated that he was proven right with the one lesson I wanted to be wrong.

Love is a weakness, Luca. It has brought the strongest men to their knees. Women are weak, and making us believe we could love them is their way to manipulate us because it's the only way for them to have power. Don't let a woman hold that power over you. You will be Capo. A Capo can't allow himself a weakness.

Aria made me believe those words to be a lie.

With her kind smiles, her innocent eyes and unparalleled beauty she lured me in, and I fell into her trap. I still remembered that fucking day.

"You are good, Aria. You are innocent. I forced you into this." Aria had taken a bullet for me, had risked her life to save mine. My life, which was worth so much less than hers.

Her blue eyes held mine. Those eyes, always full of so many emotions I could hardly understand. "You didn't, Luca. I was born into this world. I chose to stay in this world. Being born into our world means being born with blood on our hands. With every breath we take sin is engraved deeper into our skin."

I shook my head. "You don't have a choice. There's no way to escape our world. You didn't have a choice in marrying me either. If you'd let that bullet kill me, you would have at least escaped our marriage."

"There are few good things in our world, Luca, and if you find one, you cling to it with all your might. You are one of those good things in my life."

How could she say something like that? I killed so many, and enjoyed it. If there were a Heaven and a Hell, there was no doubt where I'd end up. "I'm not good."

"You're not a good man, no. But you are good for me. I feel safe in your arms. I don't know why, don't even know why I love you, but I do, and that won't change."

I closed my eyes against the love in her gaze. Aria loved me. She'd told me before. I wasn't sure how she could after everything she'd seen me do, and it wasn't even the worst. I was still keeping that from her. "Love is a risk in our world, and a weakness a Capo can't afford," I murmured. A truth I believed all my life. A truth I lived by. A truth I thought to take into the grave with me.

"I know," she whispered, resigned.

Didn't she know what I felt? Couldn't she see? Even Matteo knew, though I'd tried to hide it from him, from everyone.

I stared at her, my chest tight with emotions that scared the shit out of me. Scared me, even though nothing really scared me anymore. I'd survived torture and excruciating pain, had tortured and inflicted pain myself, had seen so many die, had killed many of them, and here I was scared of my own emotions. "But I don't care, because loving you is the only pure thing in my life."

Aria froze, eyes filling with tears. Crying and begging had never softened my heart, but with Aria they spoke to a part of me I hadn't known existed. "You love me?" she asked, eyes full of hope and disbelief.

"Yes, even if I shouldn't. If my enemies knew how much you meant to me, they'd do anything to get their hands on you, to hurt me through you, to control me by threatening you. The Bratva will try again, and others will too. When I became a Made Man, I swore to put the Famiglia first, and I

reinforced that same oath when I became a Capo dei Capi even though I knew I was lying. My first choice should always be the Famiglia. But you are my first choice, Aria. I'll burn down the world if I have to. I'll kill and maim and blackmail. I'll do anything for you. Maybe love is a risk, but it's a risk I'm willing to take and as you said, it's not a choice. I never thought I would, never thought I could *love someone like that, but I fell in love with you. I fought it. It's the first battle I didn't mind losing."*

And fuck, those words had been the truth. I'd thought them to be true. I put Aria first, protected her, allowed her things my family had frowned upon. I'd have done anything for her, and she fucking betrayed me. Betrayed my love and trust.

Love.

A weakness.

A weakness I would no longer allow myself.

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chapter 1

Before, ARIA

My shoulder still occasionally hurt when I moved my arm too fast, but the Doc had pulled the stitches out yesterday and told me the pain would soon fade altogether. I touched the red scar below my collarbone. It was still tender. My first scar.

Luca came up behind me, towering more than a head above me, and rested his hands lightly on my shoulders, gray eyes dark with anger as they settled on the scar. He was completely naked like me after our shower, but his body was covered with countless scars. I searched his face, wondering if perhaps it bothered him that I was no longer perfect. Made Men carried their scars as testament to their bravery—and there was no braver man than Luca. But I was a woman; a woman handed over for her beauty. “The Doc said it’ll fade,” I whispered.

Luca raised his eyes to meet mine in the mirror, dark brows drawing together. He turned me around and tipped my chin up. “Aria, I don’t give a fuck if it fades or not. The only reason your scar bothers me is because it reminds me that you risked your life for an asshole like me, and that’s really the last thing you should ever consider doing.”

“I’d do it again,” I said without hesitation.

Luca grabbed my waist and hoisted me up on the washbasin. “No,” he growled, bringing his face close. His eyes burnt with anger, and others

would have cowered under the force of it. “No, do you hear me? That’s a fucking order.”

“You can’t give me an order like that,” I said softly.

He released a harsh breath. “I can and I am. As your Capo and as your husband. You won’t risk your life for me ever again, Aria. Swear it.”

I stared up at him. Perhaps he thought it was as easy as that. Luca was used to controlling everyone around him, used to having his men obey his every command, but even he had to realize that some things were out of his control, that even his power had limits.

“Aria, swear it.” He spoke in his Capo voice, the voice that made his men follow him and had his enemies cowering in fear.

I curled my hand around his neck, playing with his black hair, and brushed my lips across his. “No.”

His eyes tightened. “No?”

“No. Have you never heard the word before?” I teased him as I repeated the words I’d said to him on our wedding night.

“Oh, I hear it often,” he said, playing his part.

My face broke into a smile, but his remained dark. “Aria, I’m serious.”

“So am I, Luca. I protect the people I love. You’ll have to accept that.”

He shook his head. “I can’t because you act without thinking whenever you act out of love.”

I shrugged. “That’s how I am.”

He rested his forehead against mine. “I won’t lose you because of it.”

“You won’t lose me,” I whispered, my palm pressed against his Famiglia tattoo over his chest.

Born in Blood. Sworn in Blood.

Maybe I hadn’t made a blood oath, but what bound me to him was stronger than any oath. I was bound by love. “I’ll always be at your side.”

His eyes softened. “Let’s go on our honeymoon next week.”

Surprise washed over me. “Really?” I asked, excitement bubbling up. We’d been married for two months and there had never been talk about a honeymoon, in the beginning because our marriage hadn’t been one of love but of convenience, and later because I thought Luca was too busy.

“What about the Bratva? Won’t they attack again?” Their attack on the Vitiello mansion in the Hamptons two weeks ago cost several of Luca’s men their lives, and almost cost me mine. I’d lost my childhood bodyguard Umberto, had seen him get shot in the head, and writing the letter to his widow and children had broken my heart.

“They will attack again, but not soon. They’ll have to recuperate after losing Vitali. I can’t be gone for long, but my men can handle things without me for a week. Matteo holds almost as much respect as I do. He can take over for a while.”

I couldn’t stop smiling. “Where will we go?”

Luca kissed me before he straightened with a smile of his own. It was an expression he reserved for me, and it made my heart swell with love. “My father had a yacht in the harbor of Palermo and now it’s mine. We could spend a week yachting along the Mediterranean Sea.”

I searched his face to see if his father’s death bothered him, but even though the man had died only a few weeks ago, Luca didn’t show a hint of sadness. Salvatore Vitiello had been a man who’d instilled fear but not admiration or fondness in others. I didn’t know him well enough to be sad about his death, and if I had known him I definitely wouldn’t have been either.

“That would be amazing,” I said eventually. I’d never been to Sicily, and I would love to see where Luca’s family came from.

“You were in Italy before?” he asked.

“Only once,” I said with regret. “Father took us to Bologna for his uncle’s funeral, but we only spent a day there before we visited Turin and Milano. It was beautiful. I always wanted to return, but Father was too busy being Consigliere and he didn’t allow us to go without him.”

“Then that’s settled,” he said. “A week to ourselves.”

“I can’t wait,” I whispered, my mouth finding Luca’s. I tightened my hold on his neck as his tongue slipped in. His hand trailed down my shoulder, then my side and over my thigh. I shivered at the gentle gesture.

Because of my injury, Luca had been careful when we’d made love, and again his touch was excruciatingly gentle as he parted my legs and stroked me with expert movements. I held his gaze as he entered me with two fingers before he replaced them with his length, his tip nudging my opening. I wrapped my legs around him and took him in, still marveling at the fullness. Our mouths moving over each other, Luca thrust into me at a slow pace. I could feel his entire length as he slid in and out, and tension began coiling in my center.

Luca drew his mouth away and rasped in my ear, “Come for me, love.”

I moaned as he angled his thrust upwards. Then his mouth was back on mine and his tongue caressed me in a delicious dance. His gray eyes bored into mine. He didn’t touch me like he usually did, and I moved my hand to reach between us to touch my clit and send myself over the edge, but Luca gently pushed it away. “Let’s try to make you come with my cock only.”

I’d never managed to come without additional friction, but I was willing to give this a try. He linked our fingers and pressed them to the marble surface. He thrust into me again at the same angle as before, and I gasped at the pleasure that vibrated down from the sweet spot he hit. My eyes were wide as I held his possessive gaze. Every time we made love, he seemed to

brand me as his anew. Luca was one of the most possessive men I knew, and I had grown up among Made Men.

He hit the same spot and I gasped. It felt wondrous but I wasn't sure how long it would take me to come like that, yet Luca was in no hurry as he targeted the same spot over and over again with slow, hard thrusts.

"How does it feel?" he rumbled thickly, sweat glistening on his chest as he slammed into me again, shoving my ass back on the marble counter, but his hand dragged me back to the edge and held me in place for his next thrust.

I licked my dry lips. "Good," I gasped out as the pleasure spiked again. My toes curled and my walls began to spasm.

"Yes, love," Luca growled. "Come for me."

His tongue dipped between my lips as he hit my sweet spot again and I arched up, eyes shutting tightly. I ripped away from Luca's mouth, my head falling back as I cried out my release. Luca tensed, slamming into me harder before he let out a guttural groan and came inside me. I shook against him, my orgasm intensifying as his length twitched within me.

When I could talk again, I whispered, "Wow. That was incredible."

Luca smirked, his eyes dominant and pleased. "It was. I love that you can come with only my cock."

I frowned. "Is that not normal?" A hint of insecurity slipped into my voice. Luca and I had been sleeping with each other for over a month, but I was still far from being experienced.

Luca cupped my cheek and pulled me closer for a sweet kiss. "You are anything but normal, Aria. In every regard." I didn't stop frowning. He chuckled. "It's a good thing, trust me. I love that you can come like that. Many women need to have their clits touched, and even then some don't find release during sex."

“Oh,” I said, surprised. I couldn’t imagine that any woman wouldn’t come during sex with Luca, but I didn’t want to think about other women with Luca. He was mine alone.

Luca kissed me again before he slowly pulled out of me. “I’d better prepare everything for our honeymoon.”

I grinned. If someone had told me before my wedding that I’d be this ridiculously happy with Luca, I would have declared them insane.

LUCA

I had a hard time focusing on Matteo’s voice. All I could think about was Aria and all the ways I wanted to make her come on our honeymoon.

“Luca, why don’t you leave and we stop pretending like you give a fuck what I’m saying,” Matteo said with a grin as he lounged in the armchair in my office in the Sphere, one leg thrown over the armrest.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m listening. You don’t have to ask me about every little detail. You can make your own decisions and you’ll have Romero’s support. Don’t call me every fucking day with annoying questions.”

He shook his head. “You are Capo.”

“And you are Consigliere. I’ll be gone only one week. You can control our fucking family that long. Our uncles and cousins won’t risk an attack yet. They all want to become Capo themselves. They won’t work together.”

“I’m not worried about them attacking. I can control your soldiers and our family, but I can’t promise I won’t end up killing one or two of them.”

I rolled my eyes. Matteo was too hotheaded. “Then at least kill the troublemakers.”

“Aria must have a miracle pussy to keep you under her spell like that, or does she give head like a goddess?”

I didn’t think. I lunged and grabbed him by the throat, slamming him against the backrest. His body was tight with tension, and his right hand rested on his knife, which he hadn’t pulled. With anyone but me, that knife would have been buried deep inside my chest. I unfastened my fingers and stepped back, sucking in a deep, calming breath as I glared down at my brother who rubbed his throat, brown eyes keen and cautious.

“Wow,” he rasped. Red finger-shaped marks were blooming on his skin. “Always wondered how our dear cousin felt when you crushed his throat. Never thought you’d give me a taste.”

I didn’t apologize. Running a hand through my hair, I went to the liquor cabinet beside the desk and poured us both drinks, then carried the glasses over to Matteo and handed him one before I sank down in my armchair. He took it from me and downed the whiskey with a hiss. He had straightened but was still watching me.

“I guess I got my answer,” he said.

“To what question?”

“What it would take for you to try and kill me.”

I frowned at him. “I will never kill you, Matteo. You are my flesh and blood. You know I trust you with my life.”

Matteo gave me his shark-grin. “Luca, we both know that’s not true. We are killers. We both would kill the other if given the right incentive. And yours is Aria.”

I didn’t say anything because he was right.

“If a few dirty comments already make you go off like that, I know what would happen if I ever hurt her.”

My fingers on the glass tightened, but this time I managed to stay in my seat. “You won’t hurt her so the discussion is moot. And you are my brother, Matteo. You and Aria are the only people I care about.”

He nodded, then the tension slipped away and he leaned forward to punch my shoulder.

I let him and smirked. “You know how to push my fucking buttons.”

“That’s what I do best,” Matteo said, then in a rare moment of seriousness, “I would probably have done the same if you’d insulted Gianna.”

I sighed. I’d tried to forget that he’d asked for her hand and that their engagement party was supposed to happen in three weeks. That was going to be a mess. Everyone knew it, except for Matteo. He still believed marrying the bitchy redhead would be a fucking adventure. A joyride through hellfire, no doubt.

My cell rang and I groaned when I saw it was my stepmother Nina. I’d tried calling her to tell her we’d need the yacht but she hadn’t picked up, and now that she was finally returning my call, I felt my usual contempt rear its head.

Matteo glanced down at the screen and got up. “Don’t say hi from me. I’ll go ahead and greet the Underbosses and Captains.” He stared at himself at the mirror next to the door and arranged his dark hair until he was satisfied before he sauntered off. I rolled my eyes. Vain bastard. As if my soldiers gave a fuck if he looked *pretty*.

The ringing of my phone continued. Talking to Nina and having to listen to my uncles all evening, what a fucking waste of my time, when I had a gorgeous woman waiting in my bed. I took the call. “Nina.”

“Luca, dear, you called me?”

Dear? We both knew that there was no love wasted between us. I'd hated her from the moment she'd married my father when I was only ten. Sometimes I'd almost felt pity for her when my sadist father beat her up, but that stopped when I'd seen her take out her frustration on the maids. She was a backstabbing creature—many women in our circles were, either because they had no other way to defend themselves, or because they were bored. Before I got to know Aria, I'd worried she'd hide an ugly persona behind the immaculate appearance, but she was fucking perfect inside and outside. And I was fucking glad, because with a woman like Nina at my side, things would have ended badly.

"I need Father's yacht in four days. You'll have to spend the next two weeks in our holiday house if you don't want to return to New York," I told her.

"I'm touring around the coast of Sardinia. You can't expect me to return because you decide you need a vacation," she snapped.

I'd been too lenient with her since Father's death three weeks ago. "You will do as I say, Nina. I am Capo now and you'd better remember that I am my father's son, or have you forgotten what I'm capable of?"

Silence. I didn't like hurting women, but shortly after she'd married my father I caught her hitting Matteo. I was only ten but already as tall as her and stronger. I grabbed her by the throat, and perhaps I wouldn't have let go if Father hadn't come in that moment. Nina saw it in my eyes then that I was a killer. Father had beaten her to within an inch of her life for touching his sons, even when he tortured Matteo and me all the time to make us stronger. One year later I killed my first man, and six years after that I crushed my cousin's throat like I'd wanted to crush Nina's when she'd hurt my brother, and she *knew*.

“How can you ask me to return when you know I’m still grieving?” She added that annoying vibrato to her voice as if she was on the verge of tears, which we both knew she wasn’t.

“Don’t lie to me,” I hissed. “You hated my father as much as I did. You wanted to kill him yourself so don’t pretend you’re sad he’s gone. And don’t pretend you don’t let some jailbait skipper fuck your brains out on Father’s fucking yacht.”

Nina cleared her throat. Did she think I didn’t have contacts in Sicily? My great uncle was Capo of the Famiglia there, and of course one of his men kept watch over her for me. I’d seen photos of her with the twenty-year-old skipper, and what they’d been doing on deck didn’t look anything like grieving. She was only in her mid-thirties since she was forced to marry my father when she was only nineteen, and I didn’t give a fuck if she screwed around as long as it didn’t cause me problems. “And Nina, I’m Capo, I could decide you have to marry again. There are enough men in my ranks who have the same disposition as my father.”

She sucked in a breath. I had no intention of marrying her off to someone else. No matter how much I despised her, she’d suffered enough under my father’s rule.

“You can have the yacht but I won’t come back to New York,” she said quietly.

“For all I care you can move to Italy, Nina. I don’t miss you, trust me.” Before I hung up, I added. “And have someone clean every inch of the yacht. I don’t want to find any traces of your fucking anywhere, understood?”

She gasped, but I didn’t wait for her reply.

After the call with Nina, I was in need of that fucking vacation but first I’d have to survive a meeting with the Underbosses of the Famiglia, two of

whom were my uncles, and two the husbands of my aunts. I headed out of my office and to the very last door in the back of the Sphere.

I stepped inside. Everyone was already gathered around the oval wooden table. Matteo's expression didn't bode well. It was good I joined them or he'd soon have killed someone.

The men got up, even Matteo, because he knew how to keep up appearances even if he never treated me like a Capo when we were alone—but Uncle Gottardo took his sweet-ass time rising from his chair, probably his way of showing me that he didn't respect me.

I indicated for them to sit back down as I let my gaze wander over them. There was Uncle Ermano, my father's youngest brother, who was Underboss of Atlanta, and my uncle Gottardo who ruled over Washington DC in my name. Across from them sat Uncle Durant, who ruled over Pittsburgh and was the husband of my aunt Crimella, and next to him sat Uncle Felix, husband of Aunt Egidia and Underboss of Baltimore. The Underbosses who ruled over Charleston, Norfolk, Boston and Philadelphia weren't related to me, at least not close enough to be considered family. All the men were in their late forties to late sixties, except for Matteo and me. My uncles thought I was too young to be Capo. They didn't say it outright but I knew it from the looks they shared, from the occasional challenging comment.

"There's a lot for us to discuss. I know this is only our second meeting and you have to get used to my way of dealing with things, but I'm sure we can control the Russian threat if we work together as one."

"In your father's time, the Bratva would have never dared to attack the Vitiello mansion. They showed respect," Gottardo said. His eyes held contempt. He still hated me for having crushed his son's throat six years ago, but my cousin got what he deserved for trying to kill Matteo and me to

improve his position. If it had been up to me, Gottardo would have shared his fate. I still doubted Gottardo hadn't been involved in any of this. Father had believed his claims of innocence for whatever inexplicable reasons, but I distrusted the man. If I had to make a bloody statement to establish myself as Capo, I'd start with him.

"My father got hit in the head by a Bratva bullet. How's that showing respect?" I asked in a deadly voice as I stepped to the front of the table. I didn't sit down, wanting them to crane back their fucking necks to look up at me. Let them see who ruled over the city now, *who ruled over them*. I didn't give a fuck if they were happy that I was Capo at only twenty-three. I'd kill every fucker in the room if it meant I stayed in power.

Matteo shot me a grin. He'd taken out his knife when Gottardo had spoken and was now twirling it around in his hands, his feet propped up on the table. He definitely would appreciate a bloody statement.

Gottardo and my other uncles slanted him nervous glances. They would have never become Underbosses if it weren't for my father. The other men who'd earned that position, they were the ones I needed to convince of my capability, because they held their soldiers' respect.

"You need to send them another message," Gottardo said sharply.

I walked around and stopped beside his chair. He made a move to stand up but I shoved him back down. "I sent them Vitali in bite-sized pieces, a letter of warning attached to his cut-off dick. I think they got the message. Question is if you got the message that I'm your Capo, Gottardo." He had to crane his neck all the way back to meet my gaze. Then it flitted over to Ermano beside him for help, then over to my other uncles. Neither of them made a move to come to his aid.

"You'd do good to respect your elders. Perhaps the others are too cowardly to say it out loud, but you shouldn't have become Capo. You may

be strong and cruel, but you are too young," he muttered, trying to salvage his pride.

Matteo lowered his feet from the table, the grin slipping off.

"And who, pray tell, should have become Capo in my stead? You, *Uncle*?" I said in a low voice. "After all, your family tried to stop me from becoming Capo once before, and your son paid with a crushed throat for the betrayal."

Gottardo jumped up and this time I let him. He only reached my nose, so if he thought he could impress me like that, he was a fucking fool. "He would have been a better Capo than you. I would be a better Capo. You, like your father, aren't fit for the honor."

"Now, Gottardo, you are talking bullshit and you know it," Durant muttered, eyes flitting nervously between Matteo and me.

I gave Gottardo my coldest smile. "That sounds a lot like breach of oath to me. I am your Capo."

"I never made an oath to follow *you*."

Ermano grabbed his brother and tried to pull him back down, but Gottardo resisted. "Shut up, Gottardo, for God's sake. What's gotten into you?"

"No," he spat out. "First Salvatore, now him. I won't follow the orders of someone who could be my son. If it wasn't for his father, he wouldn't be Capo. He inherited the title but he's not worthy."

"If we weren't family, I'd have cut your tongue out by now," Matteo said as he came up behind me.

I wanted to kill Gottardo on the spot, wanted to crush his throat like I'd done with his fucking son. I was one hundred percent sure that he'd sent his son to kill me all those years ago.

I looked at each of my Underbosses. “How fast can you summon your Captains and their soldiers for a meeting?”

Mansueto, Underboss of Philadelphia, stood, supporting his weight with his cane. Since his second heart attack three months ago, he’d become a shadow of the man I’d known. His family was loyal to the bone. If he died, it would lead to more trouble. Philadelphia was important, and his son Cassio was only four years older than me. “Tonight. Tomorrow morning at the latest.”

The other men nodded their agreement, everyone except for Gottardo, who was watching me with suspicion, and Ermano who said: “It takes at least fifteen hours to drive up here from Atlanta. And I don’t know if we can fly everyone over that quickly. Tomorrow morning would be better if you intend to involve the soldiers as well.”

Matteo shot me a questioning look but I faced off with Gottardo. “Then tomorrow morning. Call everyone. Tomorrow I’ll have every Made Man of the Famiglia make their oath to me.”

Gottardo sneered. “What makes you think they will do it? Perhaps they want someone else to be Capo.”

I nodded. “I will allow whoever deems himself more worthy to challenge me. You can contest against me. If you get the support of the majority of the soldiers, I will step down.”

Matteo looked at me like I’d lost my fucking mind, but I knew this was the only way to force all the voices who doubted me because of my age to die down.

“Tomorrow at eleven in the abandoned Yonkers power plant,” I ordered. My men exchanged looks. That was where the last bloodbath in the history of the Famiglia had gone down, and the press called the place Gateway to Hell. I sent Gottardo a smirk. “Good luck, Uncle.”

I turned on my heel and left them to their shock. I was done with this fucking meeting. Until I had the full support of the Famiglia, it made no sense to discuss the Bratva.

Matteo jogged after me. “Luca, you are Capo. Why are you risking everything?”

“I’m not,” I said. “My men will pledge loyalty to me.”

Matteo stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “You should have cut Uncle Gottardo’s throat. That would have quieted down the doubters as well. We’re not the fucking Senate or anything. We don’t vote our Capo, Luca.”

“I’m the youngest Capo in history and I need to silence all my enemies. This once I will give them the chance to speak up.”

“And you are sure you will still be Capo tomorrow?” Matteo asked quietly.

“The Famiglia needs strength. They need a brutal hand. My men know that.” And everyone knew there was no one who could deal out revenge with more brutality than I.

Matteo nodded, then squeezed my shoulder. “I hope you are right, because if not things will get bloody.”

I met his gaze. “I won’t ever bow down to anyone’s orders again. I will either rule over the East, or I will go down fighting.”

“I know. So if things don’t go as planned we’ll have to knife and shoot our way out. And we might both die, and I hate to say it, but I’d really loathe to die before I get the chance to fuck Gianna at least once.”

I shook my head. “Perhaps I’m saving you a lot of trouble if I get us killed.”

He smirked. “I like trouble,” he said, as if didn’t I know it. “Will you tell Aria about this?”

I paused. I had to figure out a way to keep her safe if things went downhill. There were many men in my ranks who would love to get their hands on her, and that was never going to happen. “No,” I said. “I don’t want her to worry about me.”

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chapter 2

ARIA

Something was off. I'd known it the moment Luca had come home last night, and my suspicions were confirmed the next morning as I watched him put on his gun and knife holsters. Two knives strapped to his front, two to his back with two knives below. Two more knives at his calves. Luca had asked me to get ready as well, but didn't say why. He hadn't been forthcoming with any kind of information, but something must have happened with his Underbosses yesterday for him to call a meeting of the entire Famiglia.

"Luca, I'm starting to get worried," I said quietly as I brushed my hair then lowered the brush to my vanity in the bedroom.

"Don't worry," he said firmly, taking my hand and pulling me against his chest. "This is me being overprotective. You will spend the morning with Romero. He will keep an eye on you."

"I'm worried for you, not me," I said with a frown.

His expression softened, but then he gave me a smirk. "I'm difficult to kill."

I jerked. "Someone will try to kill you today?"

He kissed my lips, his hold on me tightening almost painfully before he pulled back. His hand around mine, he led me downstairs where Romero was waiting, looking as worried as I felt. He quickly masked his emotions

when he spotted me, but it was too late. “Luca,” I whispered. “What’s going on? I thought this was only a meeting of the Famiglia.”

Romero and Luca exchanged a look, and Romero nodded, then moved toward the entrance door.

Luca cupped my cheeks, his body shielding us from Romero’s gaze. I searched his eyes for reassurance but he shut me out. Fear clawed at my chest, and tears sprang into my eyes. Perhaps he tried to shield me from the realities of mob life, but I was the daughter of the Outfit’s Consigliere. The mafia was in my blood. I knew its rules, its people. A new Capo meant a shift in power.

Luca shook his head. “No,” he growled. “No tears.”

I blinked and sucked in a deep breath. “You will return to me.” It was more question than statement.

Dark determination filled Luca’s face. “Always. Even if I have to slaughter a thousand men to do it.”

Good God. I believed him. He gave me another kiss then tried to step back, but I tightened my hold around his waist.

“Aria,” he said quietly, but I didn’t release him. Luca gave Romero a sign and a moment later, Romero gripped my upper arms and gently pried me off Luca. After a last look at me, Luca walked out of the apartment. The elevator doors closed to his strong back.

“Come on, Aria,” Romero said in a gentle voice, releasing me. “We should get going as well.”

“Is he in trouble? Is it because he’s a young Capo?”

Romero shook his head. “Luca doesn’t want you to know details. Don’t ask me for answers I can’t give you.”

LUCA

The Yonkers power plant with its reddish brown brick front loomed near the Hudson River, a crumbling relic of the past—like my uncles.

“The Gateway to Hell,” Matteo muttered under his breath as we parked near the entrance. The neglected surroundings of the power station were crowded with dozens of cars.

Gateway to Hell… The press had given the building that name in recent years because of gang wars, but the last real bloodbath had been orchestrated by the Famiglia, and perhaps today another one would follow. Romero was taking Aria on a trip around the city today. I didn’t want her in our penthouse or in the mansion if things escalated. If Matteo and I died, Romero would take her to Chicago. The Outfit would protect her.

The two smokestacks rose up into the sky like gun barrels. My own guns strapped to my chest would hopefully not come to action today. Matteo and I stepped through the creaking gates, past rust-consumed pipes, into the cathedral-high main hall of the building. Hundreds of men turned their heads toward me as I strode past them. The front was made up of the soldiers from New York and Boston, soldiers I’d worked with frequently over the years, but in the rows behind them I saw many less familiar faces: soldiers from Washington and Atlanta, from Cleveland and Philadelphia, and the other cities of the East Coast under my rule. Some of them had never seen me in person, only heard the stories and seen press photos. A murmur went through them as they regarded me. I hadn’t chosen a three-piece-suit for the occasion like my father and the Capos before him would have done. I was dressed in a tight dark gray dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up, displaying the muscles I’d worked hard for.

I didn’t choose one of the high platforms, which allowed for a jaw-dropping view of the hall, for my speech. The distance would have diminished the effect my size had on people. I wanted my men to see me up close, especially those who hadn’t seen me before. I jumped up on a low concrete platform with the remnants of rusted bolts before I turned to the gathered Famiglia. Matteo remained off to the side. Having him up here with me would have suggested I needed his reinforcement, but today I needed to show my men that I could handle anything on my own.

I raised my hand and at once my men quieted. Gottardo in the very front glared up at me with barely hidden contempt. “Thank you for following my call,” I boomed. “I know the Capos before me have never called for a meeting of this proportion, but times are changing and while we are bound to our traditions and rules, which I have always honored, some things need to be changed. We need to adapt so the Famiglia stays strong, so we can brave future threats and come out stronger.”

Most of the younger soldiers nodded and even many of the older, but some faces remained skeptical, among them my uncles Gottardo and Ermano. “As my sign of respect for all of you, I called this meeting so you can voice your concerns before you pledge loyalty to me.”

Surprised whispers.

I gestured at Gottardo, who immediately straightened. “To show you that I’m serious about this, I will allow one of my critics the floor now, my uncle Gottardo Vitiello, Underboss of the Washington Famiglia. Some of you might have heard of him.”

It was a jab I couldn’t resist. Gottardo had always been more about words than actions. I doubted many of them had ever seen him outside of his office.

Gottardo came forward and clambered up on the platform with some trouble. It had been a while since his last fight, as the pouch showing against his suit attested. He gave me a barely-there nod of acknowledgement and once more I wondered if I should have followed Matteo's advice and cut the man's throat, but he was family and I, at least, had to pretend I gave a shit about that.

Gottardo cleared his throat and opened his arms wide. "I don't mean any disrespect. Whoever knows me, knows I am all about respect," he began, and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. He was all about bad-mouthing behind people's back. That had nothing to do with respect.

"But some things need to be said for the sake of the Famiglia. We need a strong hand, an experienced hand to guide us. Luca is strong but he is too young, too inexperienced."

A few astonished whispers arose. My face gave nothing away. If my men thought Gottardo's words had an impact on me, they might consider them to be true.

"We have many capable Underbosses with decades of experience. One of them could become Capo until Luca is older."

Fucking bullshit. Once I stepped down, Gottardo, and my other uncles and their sons, would make sure it stayed that way, probably with a knife in my back.

I raised my hand again, my expression steel. "Whose name instills respect in the Outfit? Whose revenge does the Bratva fear when they consider attacking us? I've been a member of the Famiglia for twelve years. I've killed close to two hundred enemies. It's my name they whisper in fear. The Vice. They fear me because my actions speak louder than my age, because I'm capable of doing what has to be done, no matter how bloody, no matter how dangerous, no matter how merciless. You are older, Uncle

Gottardo, that's true, but how many fights have you taken part in, how many men have you tortured, how many enemies have you killed? You are *old*. And that's what's saving you today. I won't kill you for speaking up against your Capo because I respect my elders. I respect them as long as they respect me, so next time you consider revolting, neither your age nor your status as my uncle will stop me from ramming my knife into your heart." I focused on the many hundred men below me. "Those who have fought beside me know why I am the Capo the Famiglia needs at this time. I know how to fight, unlike so many past Capos who spent their time hidden behind desks and behind their bodyguards. But I can act diplomatically, as my union with the daughter of Rocco Scuderi should have proven."

"We don't want the Outfit whore in the Famiglia!" shouted a deep male voice.

My eyes swiveled toward the direction the shout had come from. Matteo flashed me his twisted-as-fuck grin. Gateway to Hell. Tonight there would be blood.

"Who said it?" I asked.

A few people shifted to my right. I focused on them. There was a tall asshole whom I didn't know, probably one of Gottardo's men, who met my gaze.

"Who?" I roared.

"I did," he admitted, voice firm.

I leaped off the platform and stalked toward him through the parting crowd. Matteo was close behind me. My men looked up at me with respect and fascination. Most of them were much shorter than me, and as I stopped right in front of the asshole who'd badmouthed Aria, he too had to tip his

head up slightly, even though he was six three. I knew what I looked like to most people—like the Devil arisen from Hell.

“I prefer to know the name of the men I kill, so what’s your name?”

“Giovanni,” he said, trying to sound unfazed but failing. Sweat coated his upper lip and his hand rested on the gun at his waist.

“Giovanni,” I said in my deadliest voice, bringing us even closer, my eyes telling him what lay ahead of him.

He backed away one step, only one, but everyone saw.

My smile pulled wide. “What did you call my wife?”

His eyes flitted around. “She was payment for the truce. She’s a whore,” he got out then added quickly. “I’m not the only one who thinks that way.”

“Is that so?” I asked, letting my furious gaze glide over the surrounding men, most of them Gottardo’s soldiers. None of them confirmed what Giovanni had said, but I could imagine what Gottardo had told them. “Perhaps they will help you, Giovanni. I hope some of them do, so I can carve them up as well.”

Giovanni jerked, fingers wrapping around the handle of his gun. My hand darted forward, closing around his throat, and I thrust him to the ground, rammed my knee into his chest to hold him down. He was choking as my fingers halted his oxygen supply. I held his gaze, relished in the panic in his eyes as he battled death. His struggle became jerky as he arched up and twisted, but I didn’t ease up. I held my hand out to Matteo. “Knife.”

I had my own, but it would have taken considerable effort to free it from my calf or back holster with the struggling asshole beneath me. Matteo handed me his favorite skinning knife with a short, sharp carbon blade, built to go through flesh like butter. Giovanni’s eyes widened, from terror and lack of oxygen.

Shortly before he lost consciousness, I released his throat and his mouth opened wide to gulp down air. I wedged my hand between his upper and lower jaw to keep it open, then brought the knife down on his tongue. He bit down, shrieking hoarsely, but the blade cut through his flesh. Pain shot through my fingers from his locked-down jaw but I'd had worse. I dropped the knife and reached for the half cut-off tongue, then ripped it out with a vicious tug. His eyes rolled back as blood filled his mouth. He fell to his side, twitching. He would die of blood loss or choke on his own blood soon.

The slimy tongue still in my hand, I turned in a circle to show my men that I saw them all, then I dropped the useless piece of flesh on the ground before I returned to the front, my hand and forearm coated in blood. I jumped up on the platform and faced the crowd, not bothering to clean myself. I'd let them see the blood, but the majority of eyes were fixed on my face, and sick respect twisted their features. "My wife is an honorable woman, *my woman*, and I will kill anyone who dares to disrespect her." I hoped this would settle the matter once and for all.

Matteo smirked at me as he held the bloody knife I'd dropped. I gave him a nod and he spoke up. "Now that we've settled Giovanni's wayward tongue, it's time you pledge loyalty to your Capo. Those of you who still think Luca isn't fit to be Capo can step forward and not speak the oath. It's up to you." He showed them his teeth and wiped the blade on his trouser leg.

Nobody stepped forward, and when Matteo rested his palm over his heart and began the words of our oath, "Born in blood, sworn in blood," the crowd fell in as one. I breathed deeply, watching my men as they looked up at me. I'd silenced my critics for now, scared them into silence, but they wouldn't always remain that way. Yet for now, I was Capo, a stronger Capo than my father had been because I had given my soldiers the sense that they

had chosen me. When I stepped down later, I took the towel Matteo handed me to clean my hand before I accepted the congratulations from my soldiers and shook hands.

My men sought my closeness, especially those who had never met me before. They had only ever talked about me, and now they could talk *to me*. I gave them what they were looking for. Talked, listened, clapped shoulders.

Mansueto, Underboss in Philadelphia, who supported his weight on a cane, approached me later, his son Cassio towering over him. I shook Mansueto's hand then Cassio's. "Your wife brings splendor and light to New York. In my almost seventy years I've never seen beauty like hers. Truce or not, you are blessed to have her in your bed."

I tensed.

"Father," Cassio said in warning, sending me an apologetic look.

Mansueto gave me a smile and nodded. "Protective as you should be. I'm an old man. Don't mind me."

I knew Aria was beautiful. Had she been born in the past she would have been queen, given to a king for her gorgeousness, and even now she was meant for the stage, meant to be admired by millions. She would be the wet dream of millions of teenage boys, would haunt the fantasies of millions of married men who couldn't get off with the images of their own wives—if she weren't my wife. But I was a possessive asshole, and that's why she'd always only be mine. Every inch of her.

"I know today isn't a good time but I need to discuss my succession with you," Mansueto said.

Cassio's mouth tightened. "You won't die today, Father."

"But maybe tomorrow," Mansueto said.

I leveled my gaze on Cassio. "You will take over from your father."

Cassio inclined his head. "If you give your assent. I am young."

I smirked. “Not as young as I. The Famiglia needs young blood.” I turned to Mansueto. “No offense.”

“No offense taken. There are certain forces in the Famiglia that are holding us back. But I have faith that you will burn the problem by the roots.”

Mansueto’s gaze moved to the center of the hall where Giovanni had bled out. Nobody had come to his aid. “I will.”

ARIA

Romero and I had been driving around New York for close to two hours. I was starting to grow restless and Romero’s grip on the steering wheel tightened with every passing moment. This wasn’t a simple meeting of the Famiglia, or Luca wouldn’t have put these kinds of precautions in place. My eyes were drawn up to the Flatiron Building as we crept past it in traffic, trying to distract myself from my growing panic—in vain.

“Luca is strong, Aria,” Romero assured me again, but his words didn’t quiet my fears. He’d managed to dishevel his brown hair completely from running his hands through it so often, and his blatant sign of nerves made me all the more nervous in turn.

Two hours.

What if he didn’t return to me?

Romero’s mobile beeped and he pulled it out, eyes darting down to the screen before they returned to the windshield and the tension slipped off him. He smiled. “Everything’s fine. We can go home.”

I slumped in the seat, pressing a hand against my lips as I closed my eyes to fight tears of relief. When I opened them again, Romero was

watching me with a hint of surprise, but then he turned back to the front.

“Why?” I asked quietly. “Why are you surprised?”

“Few thought you’d deal well being married to Luca. Many think you’ll celebrate his death,” he said carefully.

“And you what do you think?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“Romero, I think I deserve the truth.”

“When I first saw you when you were only fifteen I felt pity for you. Don’t get me wrong. I respect Luca more than anyone else. He is my Capo, but I’ve fought at his side for years. I know what this life does to people, have seen what Salvatore Vitiello did to Luca and Matteo both. Luca was born and bred to be Capo.”

“I know what he is,” I said firmly. “And I love him.”

Romero gave me a small smile, brown eyes gentle. “I know. When you caught that bullet for him that became pretty clear, but it still surprises me sometimes.”

“Me too,” I admitted with a small laugh, because a few months ago I was still one of the people who thought becoming a young widow would be the best thing that could happen to me.

“He will do anything for you, you know that?”

I frowned. “Not if it hurts the Famiglia.”

Romero’s lips twisted in an ironic smile, but he didn’t say anything.

Darkness lurked in Luca’s eyes when he returned from the meeting with the Famiglia late in the afternoon. I was reading a travel magazine that featured the south of Italy on the couch in the living room but rushed

toward him the second Romero disappeared in the elevator, threw my arms around his middle, and buried my face in his chest. I smelled blood, but beneath it lay Luca's comforting musky scent. Luca held me for a few moments until I drew back to look at his face.

"Are you all right?" I asked him, my voice breathless.

He didn't say anything, only stroked my hair. Smiling, I grabbed his hand and brought it to my lips, kissing his knuckles. When I pulled back I noticed the dried blood that had gathered in the fine lines between his fingers. I stiffened before I could control the reaction. I had seen blood before. On Luca's shirts and body, and on every inch of the floor in the mansion after the Bratva attack, but this came unexpected.

Luca grimaced and pulled his hand away.

I searched his eyes. "What happened?" When it became clear that he was reluctant to tell me, I grabbed his hand again to show him that a bit of blood didn't bother me and moved closer to him. "Please tell me. You can trust me."

"I don't want to sully you with the horrors of my life."

"Your horrors don't scare me. I'm here to help you deal with them."

He didn't look convinced but he answered nevertheless, "I had to make a bloody statement at the meeting today."

"Bloody statement," I echoed. I'd heard the term before. "You killed one of your soldiers?"

He raised his other hand and trailed it down my cheek to my throat, then over my shoulder. "So innocent," he whispered darkly.

I pursed my lips. "Not that innocent anymore, thanks to you." It was meant in a sexual way, meant to lighten the mood, but Luca nodded, eyes flickering with remorse.

"I still remember the first time I saw you. Fuck, you were a child."

“I wasn’t that young, Luca,” I contradicted him. “And you are only five years older than me. You make it sound like you are an old creep.”

“Even on our wedding day you still had that childlike innocence. You had been sheltered, protected. You were pure and I was anything but. Perhaps I’m not that much older but I’ve done so much, seen so much.”

I wasn’t sure if he was talking about the things he’d done as a Made Man or as a sought-after bachelor. I knew he’d been with many women. One look at the press and that much became clear. And I wasn’t quite sure where he was going with his words. “You never seemed bothered by my lack of experience…”

“I’m not. You know how possessive I am. I would have had to kill every man you’d been with in the past, so it’s a good thing I’m the only one.”

I released an exasperated breath, but I could feel that his mood was slightly lifting. “How many women have you slept with? You had your first time when you were thirteen, so you’ve had ten years before we married.” I’d been wondering about it for a while, even if I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer, but I knew it would distract Luca from whatever demons the meeting had called out.

Luca’s expression closed off. “That’s not important. It’s the past.”

“But I’d like to know.”

“It doesn’t matter if there were one hundred or one thousand before you, because now there’s only you, Aria,” Luca said firmly.

I sighed. Perhaps he was right but I couldn’t let it drop that easily. “One thousand?” I prompted, widening my eyes.

He smirked. “Nice try. Let’s just say I took what I could get.”

“And you got a lot,” I finished.

“Not important,” he murmured before he kissed me. I knew it shouldn’t be, but I couldn’t help wondering if a man who was used to being with so

many women could ever settle for only one, especially one who’d learned everything she knew about sex from him.

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chapter 3

ARIA

The mid-October sun kissed my skin as we disembarked from our private jet parked at the airport of Palermo. While the weather in New York had been gray and rainy, sunshine and warmth greeted us in Sicily.

I tilted my face up, relishing the touch of the sunrays on my skin. In preparation for the warmer climate, I'd put on my orange maxi dress with the ombre effect and the golden belt accentuating my waist, as well as my favorite flat golden sandals.

Luca's hand tightened around mine and I slanted him a look, finding him scowling menacingly at our pilot who had been ogling me. I tugged at his hand and he focused on me, the scowl slipping away. "You are too beautiful."

"Right," I said with a laugh. "Let's go. I want to see the yacht." That, and I wanted to get away from the pilot before Luca decided to relieve him of a few limbs.

A driver waited for us beside a white Maserati SUV when we stepped out of the airport. "It's a soldier of the Sicilian Famiglia. My great-uncle is Capo."

My eyes widened. "Oh, really? Have you met him before?"

"Twice. He wasn't at my father's funeral because he was getting a pacemaker at the time. He's in his seventies, so at some point his grandson Alessandro will take over."

“Not his son?”

“Dead. Killed by the Camorra. They rule over Naples and Campania.”

“Oh. What about the Camorra in the States?”

“They keep to themselves in the West. Benedetto Falcone is as crazy as they come.”

We arrived at the car. Our driver, a tall guy around Luca’s age with dark hair and a dark beard, shook Luca’s hand and introduced himself as Alessandro in Italian. Luca seemed surprised, then said in fluent Italian: *“I didn’t recognize you. It’s been a while. I didn’t expect my great-uncle to send his own grandson to greet me.”*

Alessandro inclined his head. *“A sign of respect, Luca, as men of honor.”* He turned to me and his eyes traveled the length of me, obviously surprised before he met my gaze and spoke to me in accented English. “It’s an honor to meet the woman with the golden hair who brought truce between the Outfit and the Famiglia.”

I almost snorted.

Luca’s vigilant gaze rested on the other man. “She’s also my wife.”

It annoyed me that they spoke English with me, expecting me to be incapable of speaking Italian. Perhaps I was famous for my beauty, but I had finished school best in class and could have gone to any Ivy League college I wanted if I wasn’t who I was.

I smiled despite my annoyance, and said in flawless Italian, *“I didn’t bring truce, Luca did because he is the best Capo New York has ever seen.”*

Both men regarded me in astonishment and I raised my eyebrows at Luca. Appreciation flickered in his gaze before he returned his attention to Alessandro. *“Does my great-uncle expect a visit today?”*

Relief settled in my bones when Alessandro shook his head. *“He knows you’ll want to enjoy your honeymoon with your wife. But before you leave*

for New York, he'd appreciate a meeting."

"Of course," Luca said. We got into the car after Alessandro had helped Luca load our luggage into the trunk. Luca and I sat in the back, which Alessandro didn't seem to mind. I had a feeling Luca wanted to keep an eye on the other man, so I was glad when Alessandro dropped us off at the harbor and drove off. Luca rolled our two suitcases down the long landing toward a black-and-white yacht, and not a small one as I'd expected. Luca helped me climb on the boat, then hoisted our luggage on deck.

"Can you drive that thing?" I asked.

Luca grinned. "Yes. It's like driving a car."

I doubted that. He led me down to the lower decks, which were the epitome of luxurious chic with parts of the ceiling being made from glass to allow a view of the sky. The furniture, walls and carpets ranged in color from white to cream with a few darker wood elements. The seating area and the dining table were built for at least eight people. Luca kept moving until we arrived at the master bedroom with its own en-suite. The king-sized bed had a cream-colored canopy, and mirrors over the headboard as well as at the top of the canopy. I walked toward it and regarded the mirrors, half-embarrassed, half-curious.

Luca watched me with his arms crossed, and a hungry expression on his face. "Can't wait to see your gorgeous body from every angle when I'm inside you."

My cheeks burned. I wasn't sure if I liked the idea of being watched like that, and worse, watching myself.

Luca walked up to me and stroked my cheek. "Still innocent."

I frowned. It wasn't exactly that. I just wasn't keen on having my body presented in every unfavorable angle possible. "I'm not sure I need to see so much of myself."

Luca laughed. “Don’t tell me you are self-conscious, Aria. Fuck. I almost killed the pilot, the ground personnel and Alessandro because of their leering, and you feel self-conscious of that body.” He gestured at me.

“Just because others don’t see my imperfections doesn’t mean I don’t.”

He laughed again. “Perfection all over, Aria, trust me on that. I’ve seen so many women naked, and all of them would have given their left kidney to be half as gorgeous as you.”

“You have to say that as my husband,” I said, but I was starting to relax despite the mirrors. What did it matter if I wasn’t happy with the way I looked, as long as Luca thought of me as beautiful?

He touched my waist and leaned down to my ear. “I don’t have to do anything. It’s the truth. Now come, before I throw you on the bed and show you just how fucking sexy you are to me.”

I would have been perfectly fine with that, but I followed him to the upper deck and then up to the elevated pilot’s cockpit. “Wow,” I said.

Luca smirked. “Wait a sec. I have to release the moorings.” When he returned a few minutes later, he got behind the steering wheel and started the engine. I watched in fascination as he pressed buttons and checked all kinds of displays I had no clue about. Concentration filled Luca’s face as he steered the yacht out of the harbor and onto the open water.

“We can stop pretty much wherever we want, and have the place to ourselves.”

I liked the idea, liked it very much, especially the thought of having Luca to myself.

LUCA

I could tell that Aria was as excited about the prospect of having the ocean and secluded beaches to ourselves as I was. I wanted to fuck Aria on the beach, in the ocean, on the sundeck and beneath that big mirror. All of those would be firsts for Aria, and it made my cock harden only thinking about it.

Her forehead crinkled. “What about food?”

Perhaps our minds hadn’t wandered the same dark paths. I had to stifle a smile. “I asked my family to stock our fridge and the cupboards with food.”

“So we need to cook?”

Aria’s worry sent me over the edge. I roared with laughter. Aria had as much talent for cooking as I did. She definitely wasn’t like the Italian wives of the past.

“We’ll starve, or get food poisoning,” she said with a shake of her head.

“We’ll figure something out, and I’m only hungry for one thing anyway,” I said in a low voice, pulling Aria against my body.

“For now. We’ll see how you feel about that after a few days without decent food.” She pressed up to me, her soft breasts rubbing against my ribs, and I decided to find anchorage quickly. When we came to a small bay, I anchored the yacht before Aria and I went into the kitchen. We threw together a green salad and filled our plates with ciabatta, pecorino cheese, olives and Parma ham before we moved to the sundeck, sat down on the lounge furniture and watched the sun set over the ocean.

Aria sighed. “This is incredible.”

The most incredible sight of all was the golden halo the sinking sun created on Aria’s head. She put a piece of bread into her mouth then swallowed self-consciously. “You have a strange look on your face.”

I shook my head and ate a few slices of ham. Eventually, my hunger for food was replaced by another, so I set the plate down, leaned forward and slid my hand under the hem of her dress. Aria’s lips tipped upwards as she

slipped another bite of cheese into her mouth. She was still shy about seducing me, but she rarely averted her eyes anymore. I pushed my hand higher, up the soft curve of her knee. Her eyes scanned the surrounding cliffs.

“It’s only us,” I assured her. I wouldn’t risk that anyone saw what was only my privilege to see. She put down her plate and scooted closer, allowing my hand to reach up even higher. I accepted the invitation and slid my hand between her thighs, my fingers stroking her soft skin. She sighed softly, eyes filling with need as she leaned back on her arms, head tilted back, her hair falling like golden silk down her shoulders, brushing the leather of the lounge. Too fucking gorgeous for words.

I trailed higher and brushed against her wet folds. My eyebrows shot up. “No panties?” I rasped, my cock jerking.

Even in the dimming light I could see Aria’s blush. “I got rid of them before dinner.”

I groaned. Fuck, she was getting better at this. I rubbed the pad of my thumb over her clit and she pressed up against me with a twitch of her hip. With my free hand, I shoved her dress up, revealing her lean legs and her pussy. I got down on one knee and cupped her ass with my palms before I pulled her to my waiting mouth.

Aria moaned. “Yes, please,” she mewled, and fuck, I almost came in my pants. She wasn’t outspoken yet, and for her to say anything was fucking amazing. I knew she loved it when I licked her, and I fucking loved it every bit as much. I’d rarely gone down on women in the past, had preferred to fuck them hard or have them suck my dick, but with Aria having her pussy in my mouth was paradise. I’d never forget the amazement on her face when I’d licked her for the first time.

I worshipped her with my lips and tongue, and waited until she was close to her release before I pushed a finger into her. That's how she liked it best. One finger only to tip her over the edge as I sucked on her clit, and as usual I was rewarded with her cry of pleasure and her sweet juice. Fuck. I loved her taste.

When her breathing slowed, I pulled back and kissed her knee before I straightened. Aria peered up at me through lust-hooded eyes. "Get out of that dress, *principessa.* Let me see your perfect body."

She stood, lifted the dress over her head and dropped it on the ground. She was left completely naked. What kind of imperfections did she see? There were none.

I circled her waist and pulled her closer to get a taste of her nipples before I released her and made quick work of my clothes. She curled her hand around my dick but I shook my head. "I want to fuck you, Aria. Kneel on the couch."

She hesitated but then she did as I asked.

I positioned Aria so she was kneeling on all fours in front of me. That was a position we hadn't tried yet. She'd been bent over a couch, but this was new and I loved the view of her ass I got.

I lined myself up when I noticed the tension of Aria's spine and felt her pussy clamp up against my tip. Not sure what had caused her reaction, I stroked her back, but she didn't relax. She was too tense for me to enter her without causing her pain. "Aria?" I gritted out. My balls were about to burst.

She didn't react, but now her shoulders rounded in and her breathing changed. Was she crying? I circled her waist, hoisted her up and turned her around. Her eyes snapped up to me. She wasn't crying, but her expression

made it clear that she was upset about something. “Sorry,” she said quietly. “Can we try another position?”

“First tell me why you tensed? What’s the problem with you being on all fours?”

She cast down her eyes, which was a fucking bad sign.

“It reminded me of the day I saw you with Grace.”

Fuck me. I felt like the biggest asshole on the planet. I leaned down as I lifted her chin. She met my eyes, looking fucking vulnerable. “Aria, I told you she’s a thing of the past. There’s no other woman for me. Only you.”

“I know. I don’t know why I can’t forget it.”

I wasn’t sure what to do with her hurt, and so I kissed her. Drawing back, I whispered, “Let’s go inside. I’ll make love to you in our bed.” When she hesitated, I cupped her cheek and brought our faces close. “You are the only woman I’ve ever made love to, Aria.” If my soldiers could hear me now, I’d have to make another even bloodier statement to gain back their respect.

Yet, when Aria’s expression softened, I didn’t regret my words. She followed me down to the lower deck and into our bedroom. She was quiet and when I made her lie down on her back on the bed and brushed my fingers over her pussy, I could tell that she wasn’t as aroused as before. Her eyes were closed, either because of the mirror or because she was trying to hide her emotions from me. I lay down beside her and stroked her cheek. She opened her eyes and the hurt was gone, so she was shy about the mirror. I could deal with that.

I nodded toward the mirror above us and she followed my gaze. Her delicate body looked breakable in comparison to mine, her pale skin too perfect against my scars and hard muscles. Her eyes focused on the small scar on her shoulder. Trust Aria to be bothered by the one tiny flaw on her

body—which wasn't even a fucking flaw because it was proof of her love. I set out to distract her and rekindle her arousal. I cupped her breast with my hand, then wedged one nipple between my fore and middle finger and slid up and down. Aria lowered her gaze.

"No, *principessa*. I want you to watch my hands worship your body."

She raised her eyes and didn't take them off the mirror again. Her breathing hitched as my hand traveled lower. "Open your legs," I ordered, and she did. I parted her folds with my thumb and middle finger, laying her clit bare. She arched her hips and I pressed my index finger down and began rubbing small circles. Her lips parted as she rocked her pelvis. Soon she was as ready as before. I drew back and climbed between her legs before I pulled her closer, parting her legs even wider and lifting her ass. Her eyes were still focused on the mirror, and I could have come just because of the look of need and fascination on her face.

"Yes, love, watch my cock claim your pussy." She trembled with desire as I pressed my tip against her opening and eased into her tight channel. Her body took me in, yielding to the pressure, and the sight of my cock buried deep inside of her made my balls tighten. I held on to her hips as I thrust into her in a slow rhythm. I'd been slow and gentle with her since she'd been shot, and I hadn't minded, but today I wanted more. Still, after Aria's reaction on the sundeck, I didn't want to push her.

ARIA

Having Luca make love to me—nothing had ever felt better, but I could see in the hunger in his eyes, the controlled twist of his mouth that he needed more, and I was so ready for it. While I loved his softer side, I

enjoyed his darker, harder side during sex just as much. I dug my heels into his backside, meeting his gaze in the mirror. “More,” I breathed, and he complied immediately. He fell forward, catching his weight on his palms, eyes possessive and hungry as they bored into me, and then he slammed harder into me. My eyes found the mirror again, and he panted. “Yes, *principessa*. Watch us.” And I did. I couldn’t have looked away even if I’d tried. Luca was magnificent, and watching him claim me excited me like nothing ever had. The muscles in his back moved beautifully under his tanned skin, and his firm round backside tensed with every thrust. He was so strong and powerful. All man, all alpha, all mine.

He slammed harder into me, deeper, hitting the spot I hadn’t even known about before him, and I screamed out my release. Luca dropped to his forearms, thrusting harder, driving me deeper into the bed. His pants turned labored, and then he groaned. His ass tensed, his shoulder blades flexed as he came inside of me, and I almost came again seeing him like that in the mirrors. How could I have thought I would pay attention to my body when I could watch Luca? I ran my hands over his muscles, down to his strong backside, marveling that this man was mine, and not only his body but also his heart. The past didn’t matter anymore, least of all Grace. I wouldn’t give her the power to ruin another second of my honeymoon.

Luca stilled above me and buried his face in my hair but when he raised his eyes, I could read an unspoken question in them.

“I’m okay,” I said, then in a low voice, “I love the mirror.”

Luca chuckled, a dark sound from deep in his chest. “I knew you would.”

He slid off me and pulled me against him. This was a good start to our honeymoon.

The next day we set off early in the direction of a small fishing village that was overrun with tourists in the summer months, but quiet and picturesque the rest of the year. We went in search for a small café to have breakfast since our attempt at pancakes had proven a major fail. Starving, we settled at a small round table near the harbor. Luca dwarfed the wooden chair and I had to hold back laughter, but he was relaxed. More relaxed than he allowed himself to be at home. Of course, he had a gun strapped to his calf and a knife in the holster at his chest, which was why he wore a black shirt despite the warmth. It was less accepted to display weapons around here, so Luca had to adapt. I ordered a cappuccino and biscotti, even if the locals usually reserved those delicacies for the afternoon. After that Luca and I strolled along the promenade under the curious glances of locals and tourists alike. “Come on, let’s get back to the boat. I prefer our privacy.”

I had to agree. Luca and I simply attracted too much attention, which was mainly due to the fact that Luca looked like a professional football player with his size.

Luca found another beautiful secluded cove for us. My eyes wandered over the crystal water toward the untouched crescent beach. Luca held out a snorkel and a snorkeling mask. “How about a swim?”

I took both from him, surprised. “I’ve never snorkeled before.”

“Now you will,” he said. We were already in our bathing gear so we only had to put on the mask and the snorkel. I couldn’t help but grin at the sight of Luca dressed like that. “I didn’t think you were the snorkeling type. After all, you can’t take weapons with you into the water.”

He raised dark eyebrows and lifted up a calf holster with a curved knife before he strapped it to his leg. Of course, he would take a weapon with

him.

He nudged me toward the platform at the end of the yacht. I sat down on the edge and slowly glided into the water. I'd never swum so far outside and I worried that it would unnerve me not to see ground beneath my feet, but when Luca joined me, a sense of safety came over me. Luca would protect me. He was probably the most dangerous predator in these waters. I stifled a grin at the thought. The moment I put my head underwater and saw what lay below, fish and, further down, fascinating rock formations, I forgot my worries. Luca and I snorkeled for almost an hour, Luca always close to me, protective as usual.

Afterwards Luca and I had dinner before Luca took us to the beach in an inflatable. He spread out a blanket on the sand, and I sank down on it as he took the champagne from the cooler bag and settled beside me. The salty ocean air lingered in my nose.

He filled two glasses and handed me one. We clinked glasses and kissed before I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip. I'd grown used to the taste over the years and had learned to appreciate the tartness and the bubbles bursting on my tongue. Luca wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me against him, as we watched the sun set over the ocean in hues of pink and orange.

"I never imagined it would be like this," I admitted in a whisper.

Luca turned to me. "What exactly?"

"Us, our marriage," I said. "In the three years until our wedding I pictured how you'd treat me. I listened to Umberto's stories about your fights, about how you crushed a man's throat, how you killed your first man at eleven, and all I could think was that I wouldn't survive if you were the man he and everyone described."

I fell silent, my eyes trained on the waves. My fears were still fresh in my mind; they had still filled my nights three months ago, and now I sat beside Luca with champagne, feeling safer than I had all my life. Luca was watching me with rapt attention, but didn't interrupt me as I continued, "Our father occasionally hit us, Gianna more than Lily and me, but I worried you'd do worse." Luca's hand on my waist tensed but still I pressed on. "I was sheltered, true, but women talk and what I overheard many of them say about how Made Men treat their wives terrified me—and those men weren't even called the Vice. I know we haven't been married long, but if you keep treating me the way you do now, I will be happier than I thought possible. I know I can count myself lucky. I know it every time other women offer me words of consolation and send me looks of compassion because I'm your wife."

I finally met his gaze. The shadows played on his sharp features, but his eyes seemed to burn brightly with emotion. "Why aren't you the monster they all fear when you are with me?"

He didn't say anything, only drew in a deep breath. I waited, hoping he would answer my question. "Because I don't want to be. I want that part of my life to be good, pure. The rest of my life will always be filled with violence and death. Cruelty runs in my veins, and I'm gladly the monster they fear whenever I'm not with you because it's in my nature and I enjoy it, but not with you, never with you, Aria, I swear."

I tilted my head. "Can you? Swear something like that?

He thought about it for a couple of heartbeats before he murmured, "Yes, unless you do something so unforgivable I would snap."

"And then?" I prompted.

Luca made a low sound in his throat and brushed his lips over my temple. "It won't ever come to that."

I nodded, and took another sip of champagne.

“Did your father ever raise your hand against you after our engagement?” Luca whispered darkly.

I hesitated.

That was all the answer Luca needed, and he went rigid. “I warned him not to lay a hand on you.”

I touched his forearm. “That’s the past, Luca. Don’t let it ruin the present.” I could tell he was reluctant to let it go, and I decided to follow my own advice. I emptied my glass, set it down, then untangled myself from Luca’s hold and stood. I pulled my dress over my head and dropped it to the sand beside Luca, who watched me with eagerness. The only light left came from the spotlights of our yacht and the small solar lamp Luca had set up on the blanket. The breeze caught my hair and whipped it around as I smiled down at Luca. He rose to his feet and stripped out of his own clothes, and a shiver of arousal passed my back at the sight of his nudity. He stepped close and bowed down for a kiss. My hands roamed over his chest and ripped stomach as his own traveled down my back and cupped my ass. Soon my need to feel Luca inside of me drowned out all else as he worked me with strong, experienced fingers. His length dug insistently into my stomach. I stepped back, breathless, catching my breath before I said: “I want to try the position again.”

Luca nodded, but I could tell he was apprehensive as we settled on the blanket. I turned my back to him then got down on my knees and hands. My stomach twisted with nerves. For some reason, I worried this position more than any other would make Luca compare me to his previous lovers. I had seen how he had fucked Grace, how hard she’d let him take her, how unbridled Luca had been. My body still sometimes clamped up when I didn’t want it to, and new positions sometimes brought me discomfort.

Luca stroked my back, the gesture so reverent that I relaxed under his touch. He pressed up to me but didn't enter. Instead he reached around and began stroking me. I moaned and eased back a bit so Luca's tip slid in. He released a low breath before he worked his way deeper and when he filled me completely, I realized why he favored the position. He was deeper than ever before, and I had to breathe slowly through the new sensation. I felt too stretched. Luca gripped my hips and withdrew slowly before he moved back in at the same pace. He found a slow, gentle rhythm, and step by step my body grew accustomed to this angle. Luca didn't speed up, and despite the twinge it caused, I moved my hips faster to meet his thrusts and show him he didn't need to hold back. Yet his fingers on my waist tightened, restraining me. "No, love," he growled. "You are still tense around me."

"I don't care," I got out. "You can move faster."

Luca leaned forward, sliding even deeper, and I sucked in my breath as he pressed his chest against my back. "No, I can't. Not without hurting you."

"I want you to find pleasure."

"I don't take pleasure in causing you pain, believe me," he said in a gravelly voice. "We have all our lives to try every position. Don't pressure yourself because you think you need to live up to certain expectations, because you exceed them all where I am concerned."

He pulled out of me. My huff of protest died when Luca turned me around and lifted me on his lap. "Ride me. I want to look at your face."

Searching his eyes, I found he meant it and I smiled as I lowered myself on his length. Our gazes locked as I rocked my hips, and pleasure soared through my core, and even as the tension built up to impossible levels, I rode Luca at a slow pace. His pants deepened as he clung to my waist, and then my orgasm rippled over me, and Luca tensed under me, head falling

back as he came inside of me. I pressed a kiss to his throat, feeling his pounding pulse against my lips. I bit down lightly and Luca's cock jerked in me as he growled. I smiled against his skin. *Mine.*

Our days on the yacht passed too quickly and when we left the yacht in Palermo's harbor on our last day, I felt a sense of wistfulness.

Luca seemed to pick up on it. "We will be back next spring, I promise."

I gave him a grateful smile.

We still had to go through with a visit to Luca's great-uncle before we could return to New York, and I could see Luca's demeanor shift as we got into Alessandro's car—he'd picked us up at the harbor. Luca was back to being Capo, back to being vigilant. There was nothing soft or gentle about his expression now. Sometimes when I saw the looks he gave others I was reminded of my own fears of the past, and felt immense relief that they were just that: memories.

"Did you enjoy your honeymoon?" Alessandro asked—this time he didn't bother with English. He was making small talk but I could tell he wasn't into it.

"We did, thank you," I said. Alessandro glanced at Luca in the rearview mirror as if he was surprised Luca hadn't answered. I'd thought the question had been directed at both of us.

"Is there any reason why my great-uncle wants to talk to me except to rekindle family bonds?" Luca cut through to the topic on hand.

"He will share his thoughts with you," Alessandro said in a clipped voice, and the look that passed between them sent a shiver down my back.

The air seemed to thicken with their dominance. It was like being locked into a cage with two alpha wolves.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived at a sprawling estate. It reminded me of the villas I'd seen in Tuscany with its cream façade and columns. Luca's family had set up a long table in the courtyard before the front entrance. I was greeted by a wave of females with kisses and hugs, and astonished glances at my hair. They all had black hair like Luca's. I stood out as usual. Luca immediately approached a tall, elderly man with a mustache. His great-uncle, and after a moment, I went over to them as well to greet the Capo of the Sicilian Famiglia. His dark eyes appraised me, as usual lingering on my hair, then he smiled. *"You must be the pride of the Outfit."*

"I'm part of the Famiglia now, but thank you," I said, flashing him my winning smile to soften my objection. He laughed, a raspy sound, then reached for a cigar. He held one out to Luca as well, who accepted it. I suppressed a shudder. I hated the smell of it. "Call me Adalberto, if I may call you Aria?" Adalberto looked at Luca for approval. Luca inclined his head.

Of course, my opinion wasn't their concern.

"Why don't you help my daughters and granddaughters prepare our meal for us?" Adalberto said.

Luca's mouth twitched but I doubted anyone but me noticed. *"Yes, Aria, why don't you?"*

The snappy comment didn't leave my lips. I would make Luca pay later when we were alone.

I followed the women into the huge kitchen, and hoped they'd give me a task I could handle. Several pots were set up on the stove, and a whole lamb hung from a hook at the ceiling, already skinned, its dead eyes staring at me. Soon I found myself surrounded by chattering Italian women, who

spoke so fast even I had trouble understanding every word they said, and set up with the task of preparing artichokes. I had never seen anyone prepare them, and had absolutely no clue what to do. When my cluelessness became obvious, Livia, Alessandro's youngest sister who was only twelve, took the knife from me and showed me how to do it, and soon took over completely when my incompetence ruined two of the vegetables. Eventually I was given the task of stirring the soup in one of the pots. The women were kind despite my uselessness, but I could tell they were surprised that I couldn't cook.

"I suppose men in America don't expect their wives to cook?" one of Adalberto's daughters, a round woman in her forties, said. I doubted most Italian men expected their wives to be perfect cooks, but these were mafia women, and the mafia was stuck in the past.

"Look at her hair, who cares if she can cook?" Livia said, her cheeks tingeing red when I smiled at her. Her comment was greeted by a wave of nods. The role of stupid blonde didn't sit well with me, but I knew they weren't trying to be mean. Everyone knew Luca hadn't married me because of my wit. Neither he nor I had been given a choice in the matter.

When we served the prepared food to the men later, and Adalberto asked how I'd done, the women praised my abilities. Only Luca knew it was a blatant lie. I'd never be a decent cook, or anything close to it. I could tell by the tightness around his eyes that his conversation with Adalberto and Alessandro, who sat with them but avoided Luca's eyes, must have worried him.

Later when we were finally alone in our airplane, I got the chance to ask him about it.

"Things are getting difficult for the Famiglia around here. My great-uncle asked if I would take Alessandro and his sisters in if things got out of

hand.”

“And will you?”

“Of course. We are family. Honor dictates that I do, but Alessandro is destined to become Capo. He won’t bow down to my rule easily. I hope it doesn’t come to that.” His expression shifted from worry to something more relaxed. “So I hear you turned into a chef all of a sudden. Can I expect elaborate dinners in the future?”

“Of course,” I said sweetly. “You know how much Marianna enjoys going all out.”

Luca chuckled. Our housekeeper was a lifesaver when it came to food. She often prepared several meals in advance and put them in plastic boxes in our fridge so we wouldn’t starve. “You are a horrible housewife.”

I huffed. “I wasn’t raised to be a housewife. I was raised to be a trophy wife.” The words left a bitter taste in my mouth, but it was the truth and I needed to own up to it.

Luca shook his head, his eyes reverent as they trailed over me. “You were born to be a queen.”

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chapter 4

LUCA

The days passed quickly after our return to New York, and soon November rolled around and with it Matteo and Gianna's fucking engagement party. The girl didn't even try to hide that she didn't want to marry Matteo.

If it had been up to me, I'd have let Scuderi marry her off to whatever old creep he'd chosen for her before Matteo played the fucking hero and asked for her hand.

She would bring trouble to New York, and I was glad that the wedding was still more than half a year away because additional trouble was the last thing I needed at the moment.

Dante entered my mansion with Scuderi and nine-year-old Fabiano, who trailed after them like a lost puppy. Gianna and Liliana had arrived earlier with their mother and immediately gone upstairs to prepare for the festivities. Neither of the women felt comfortable around me.

Dante and Scuderi wouldn't be spending the night under my roof. They preferred a close-by hotel, and I was fucking relieved. Maybe our fathers had agreed on a truce, but Dante and I didn't trust each other. I didn't want him under the same roof as Aria. Not that he had any interest in her. He hadn't officially taken over as Boss from his father Fiore Cavallaro yet, but everyone knew he was already running the show in Chicago.

“I still can’t stand their fucking faces,” Matteo muttered. “Especially Scuderi makes me want to optimize his face with my knife.”

One day maybe, but not today.

I walked toward them and held out my hand to Dante as tradition dictated. “Dante,” I said neutrally, which was the friendliest tone I could muster. “I hear you got engaged only recently. Congratulations.”

Dante inclined his head. “The wedding won’t be a big affair like yours with Aria.”

“We’re honored to attend anyway.” Of course, we had gotten an invitation and were required to go, even if I couldn’t have cared less if Dante married or not.

Dante inclined his head, his eyes cold and wary. I shook Scuderi’s hand after that, and squeezed a bit tighter than was called for, remembering what Aria had told me in Sicily—that he had hit her even after our engagement, even after I told him she was mine.

His brows drew together. “Luca.”

I released his hand. “Rocco.”

“Where is Aria?”

“She is talking to the caterer about some last-minute changes, but she will be here any moment.”

“Is Romero still her bodyguard? I never understood how you let an attractive man close to her age guard her. I wouldn’t allow my wife an opportunity like that.”

The moment this truce was over, I’d hunt him down and show him what it felt like to drown in his own blood. I smiled coldly, my voice steel. “My men know she is mine. No one would dare look at her the wrong way. Men like your nephew Raffaele would have been skinned in New York, their skin left to dry so it could make a nice carpet for my office.”

Scuderi’s face turned red.

Dante only met my gaze with the same cold appraisal as always. “We’ve come to celebrate an engagement, not skin anyone, I assume.” His eyes said he would have preferred the latter.

I inclined my head. “Of course. We want to further our bonds, right?”

“Right,” Dante clipped, and silence followed.

Beside me, Matteo looked like he was only waiting for a sign from me to pull his knives and carve a smile into their throats.

My eyes went to the small figure behind Scuderi who watched us with huge blue eyes, Aria’s eyes.

“Fabiano,” I said, trying to soften my voice but succeeding only marginally. He peered up at his father, who gave a jerky nod before Fabiano stepped forward and held out his hand. I took it and shook it, and then the kid narrowed his eyes. “Where are Gianna and Lily?”

Protectiveness rang in his young voice, and I had to stifle a smile.

“He’s buried them in the backyard,” Matteo said with a grin.

Fabiano jerked, and I sent Matteo a scowl. “They are upstairs,” I told Fabiano and tightened my grip slightly, sending him a warning look. He was still a kid, but I wouldn’t tolerate his insolence in my own territory.

He lowered his eyes and I released him.

“I’m not telling you anything you don’t know, but you will have to beat Gianna into shape. She needs a hard hand,” Scuderi said, and Matteo’s answering grin sent me into high alert.

Dante straightened. Three years of truce. How much longer?

The door swung open and Romero stepped inside, checking if the air was clear before he allowed Aria to step through. His brows drew together when he noticed the tension between us, and he stretched out his arm to bar

Aria's way. Of course, she wouldn't have it, her eyes zeroing in on her brother.

She ducked under Romero's arm. "Fabi!" she called, her face breaking into a smile as she rushed toward us. She flung herself at her brother and hugged him tightly. The unbridled happiness on her face banished any violent thoughts I'd harbored. She pulled back, her eyes scanning her brother. "You have grown again. When will you ever stop?"

"When I'm as tall as Luca," Fabiano said firmly.

And Aria let out that bell-like laugh I fucking loved more than anything else. "Then we'll have to feed you a lot." She raised her gaze to me, so full of happiness and love I had trouble keeping my face emotionless and hard. Her expression fell slightly before realization set in as she turned to Dante and her father. Politeness and grace took over her face as she stepped up to her father and kissed his cheeks. "Father."

Then she turned to Dante. From the tense set of her shoulders I could see that he scared her, and that sight would have been enough to make me want to lunge but Matteo's hand on my forearm, a silent warning, stopped me. I sent him a look. Now he had to stop me from breaking truce, really?

Dante must have seen some of my thoughts, because his eyes narrowed the slightest bit before he took Aria's hand and kissed it. He released her quickly and she stepped back. She came to my side and I touched her waist. *Mine.*

"Has the cake arrived yet?" she asked. "The caterer said they couldn't reach the bakery, and nobody's picking up when I try to call."

I stared. I didn't even know we'd ordered cake.

She sighed. "I think I'd better have Romero drive me over there." She turned to face her brother. "Why don't you join me?"

I stifled a smirk. Aria had picked up on the tense atmosphere and she wanted her brother away from it.

Fabiano looked at his father, who waved a hand at him. “You’re only in the way anyway.”

Aria wrapped an arm protectively around her brother, eyes hardening. “Come on.” She raised her eyes to mine. “If Gianna and Lily ask for me, please tell them I’ll be back soon.” She gave me a short smile but didn’t kiss me. There would be time for that when we were alone.

“I must admit Aria seems surprisingly relaxed around you. Given your reputation I’d have thought she’d cower in front of you,” Scuderi said. “But I suppose some reputations are misleading.”

“A marriage is no place for fear,” Dante said, and I felt something like respect for him.

Several hours later, my suspicions were confirmed when Gianna caused a scene, making her reluctance to marry plainly clear to anyone who had the misfortune of being around.

Matteo took it with stride. He was the master of games, and she would be his ultimate victory, or so he thought. I had a feeling the redhead would not only make his life hell, but also mine. I could only hope she wouldn’t drag Aria into trouble with her because when her siblings were concerned, Aria lost all sense of self-preservation.

“What are you going to do about Sylvester?” Matteo asked.

I grimaced. I'd postponed a decision until now. Whenever Aria had asked what we were going to do on Sylvester I'd pretended I hadn't decided yet, but that was a fucking lie. Like every fucking year, I was invited to the social event in New York—Senator Parker's Sylvester party. The Famiglia had been working together with him for many years, and it was expected that I make an appearance as the current Capo.

"I will attend, and so will you."

"And Aria?"

That was going to be a major problem. She was my wife and of course everyone expected her to be there as well, and I wanted her at my side—if there wasn't the matter of Grace being there too. I hadn't seen her since Aria had caught me with her, and I'd forced the senator to send his daughter off to England, but she would return for the party as was expected. "She will come with us."

"That's got the potential for a scandal," Matteo muttered.

As if I didn't know that. Not that I cared about a scandal, but I cared about Aria's feelings.

"Are you sure Grace won't make a scene? You never dumped her in person."

"I never dumped her because I wasn't dating her. I fucked her, and other women." Of course, the other reason why I hadn't seen her again was that I wanted to kill her for paying Rick to put roofies in Aria's drink. If she wasn't a woman and more importantly a senator's daughter, I would have put a bullet in her head.

"Grace might disagree."

"I don't give a fuck. She'd better keep her mouth shut and treat Aria with the necessary respect, or I'll make her regret it."

That evening as Aria and I lay in bed, I finally bridged the subject I'd been avoiding. "We're invited to a party for Sylvester."

Aria lifted her head from my chest, brows drawing together. "Okay. And you only found out five days before?"

I shook my head. "I've known for a while."

She sat up and peered down at me with confusion. "And you didn't tell me, why?"

"It's Senator Parker's party."

Aria stiffened and moved to get out of bed, but I grabbed her by the waist.

"Please," she whispered. "Let me go."

I released her. That broken whisper was a fucking bullet to the heart. She slid out of bed and walked toward the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking Manhattan, leaving me to stare at her naked back. I got out of bed, moved toward her and stopped close behind. Her face was reflected in the window, but her gaze was distant as if she didn't see what lay right in front of her. I could imagine too well what memories she was reliving.

I rested my hands on her hips and my chin on the top of her head. "Aria __"

"Grace will be there," she said quietly, and finally raised her eyes to mine in the window.

"Yes."

She gave a sharp nod then tried to step out of my hold, but this time I didn't let her evade me again. "No," I growled, tightening my grip on her waist. "Don't make a bigger deal out of this than it is."

Anger flashed across her face, and she surprised me by ramming her elbow into my side. I let go of her in shock. She whirled around, her eyes furious. "A bigger deal than it is?" She brought her palms up against my

chest and shoved hard. I had to bite back a grin. That would have sent the wrong message. When I spotted the hint of tears in her eyes, my amusement died.

“Aria, I don’t give a fuck about Grace, believe me. It doesn’t matter if she’s at the party or not.”

“If it doesn’t matter, then why did you keep the party a secret from me for so long?”

“Because I knew how you’d react, and I was right,” I said.

She frowned.

“Come on,” I said, then took her hand and tugged her toward the bed. She followed and climbed back under the covers. I joined her and pulled her on top of me, but her body didn’t soften as it usually did.

“She will try to rub it in that you cheated.”

I stroked her soft back. “I told you before. She is a fucking rat trying to humiliate a queen. Ignore her.”

Aria sighed. “I’m not sure I can.”

“You are a mafia princess, Aria. You were brought up to brave men like me. You can stand up to a wretched whore like Grace.”

Aria tilted her head. “If you think so little of her, why did you spend time with her?”

“It’s not like I dated her. She was a fuck buddy.”

“I can’t imagine sleeping with someone I don’t have feelings for. I’ve only ever made love.” Her voice was a soft exhale.

I ran my knuckles up her spine. “Before you I ever only fucked, Aria. I didn’t care about any of those women.”

“But if you couldn’t stand their presence, wasn’t it difficult to spend time with them after sex?”

My brows pulled together. “I didn’t stay afterwards.”

Aria’s eyes filled with incredulity. “You slept with them and left immediately after you were done?”

“I *fucked* them and left, yes. Why would I have stayed?”

She regarded me as if she couldn’t possibly understand my reasoning. “But…what about snuggling? Did you never long for closeness?”

I chuckled. “Oh, *principessa*, you have a wrong impression of me. This version of me is one only you have ever seen.”

She propped herself up on my chest and peered down at me. “But with me you like it?”

That she still had to ask. “No,” I murmured. “I love it.”

Her lips turned up in a gorgeous smile, then she gave me a soft kiss. *As if anyone could ever compete with Aria.*

Matteo looked like the cat that got the cream. With his sick fascination for trouble, he’d probably end up enjoying being married to Gianna after all. Thankfully, he wouldn’t marry her until the summer, so I didn’t have to bear their annoying bickering yet.

“I hope there will be a nice piece of ass for me at the party. I need a good fuck,” Matteo said.

“You can have Grace for all I care. She gives head like a pro,” I muttered.

Matteo seemed to consider that. “Not sure I want your leftovers. You wouldn’t mind?”

I snorted. “I don’t give a fuck, trust me.”

“She’ll make a move on you, Luca.”

I fucking hoped she wouldn’t, but I feared Matteo was right. I’d wounded Grace’s pride. She was a spoiled brat who was used to getting her way, and I was the first man who hadn’t fawned over her. I still wished I had killed her after what she did to Aria in the Sphere, but Father had forbidden it and our connections to Senator Parker were too important.

I was about to say something when Aria stepped out of the bedroom and onto the landing, and any sane thought escaped my mind. She wore a floor-length golden dress that fell in soft waves around her legs. It was sleeveless with a jeweled high collar. Her golden-blonde hair fell in wavy curls around her face. Now she looked like a queen.

Matteo released a low whistle. “Grace will throw a fit.”

Aria glided down the staircase and I moved toward her, extending my hand. She took it with a small smile. Nerves filled her eyes. “You are gorgeous, *principessa*.”

“You are,” Matteo confirmed.

Aria flushed and I squeezed her hand lightly in reassurance.

When we arrived in Senator Parker’s home, Aria’s hand was tense in mine, but her face didn’t reflect her turmoil. She looked regal and elegant as I led her inside his brownstone town house.

And then I spotted Grace, and worse, she spotted me.

Senator Parker sent me an apologetic look and Grace’s brother even tried to lead her away, but she sauntered over to us. She’d gone all out. A tight, gold sequined minidress that ended high up on her thighs and left little to the imagination. Her neckline dipped low, showing off her impressive chest.

Aria stiffened and I turned to her. Aria in her far less revealing dress was so much sexier than Grace could ever be. Aria was a queen, and Grace was not worthy to breathe the same air as her.

“Luca,” Grace said sweetly and actually leaned forward as if she considered hugging me, but the scowl I sent her made her pull back. “Aria,” she said with pursed lips.

“I need to have a word with you,” her brother said as he grabbed her arm and practically dragged her away. Maybe he had seen how much I wanted to end his sister, woman or not.

Aria relaxed beside me, but the first guests crowded around us soon so I didn’t get the chance to ask her if she was okay. Grace tried to catch my attention several times through the evening, but I didn’t spare her a glance and her brother paid better attention to her whereabouts, making sure she didn’t come close again.

Grace got visibly frustrated with my lack of interest and in a last attempt at getting a reaction out of me, she walked up to Matteo, who had been flirting with the daughter of another politician. She gave him her best bedroom eyes, leaning in close to him. Matteo smirked, but his eyes found me above Grace’s head.

I raised my eyebrows at him. *Have a go at her.*

He whispered something in her ear, wrapped his arm around her waist and cupped her ass. Before she led him away, she sent me a scathing look. Did she really think I gave a fuck? If she thought she could win me over by sucking my brother’s cock, then she was even stupider than I’d realized.

“Please tell me it’s not how it looks,” Aria whispered, looking sick to her stomach.

I squeezed her waist. “Matteo is going to get the blow job of his life.” A moment too late I realized how that had sounded.

Aria’s cheeks flushed and she stiffened in my hold, but I didn’t get the chance to soften my words because the owner of a restaurant chain we protected came over and involved me in a conversation. Aria’s face looked like it had been carved from stone the rest of the evening, and I could have kicked myself for my thoughtlessness. Aria stayed at my side, keeping up appearances, but she didn’t spare me a single glance.

Almost one hour later, Matteo returned to the party, his hair disheveled and a self-satisfied grin on his face. He sauntered over to us when my last conversation partner had left, and I sent him a warning look but of course Matteo, being an asshole, ignored it.

“Now I get why you kept her around for so long. Damn it, that woman doesn’t have a gag reflex.” That and she took it up her ass, but Aria didn’t need to know that.

She stiffened, paling. Matteo glanced at her, then back at me, dark eyebrows climbing his forehead. I sent him a death glare.

“Excuse me. I need to freshen up,” Aria said in a formal tone, stepping back from me.

I would have stopped her if Grace’s father hadn’t come over in that moment and I couldn’t risk a scene in public. Aria turned on her heel and stalked off, her head held high. I could have killed Matteo.

ARIA

I had trouble breathing as I made my way toward the restrooms. Luckily, nobody tried to stop me. I wasn’t sure I could have kept up my mask if they had. The moment I stepped inside the bathroom, I released a shuddering breath. I washed my hands because I couldn’t wash my face without ruining

my makeup. Lifting my face, I regarded myself in the mirror. I wasn't vain but I knew people found me beautiful. I had received praises for my beauty all my life, and yet the mention of Grace's abilities made me realize that it might not be enough to hold Luca.

He loves you.

I closed my eyes and counted to ten until I felt the necessary strength to return to the party. Grace was the past.

I moved out of the bathroom and stiffened when I saw Grace waiting for me in the hallway. She smiled but it was all fake.

Resisting the urge to lower my eyes, I met her gaze straight on. She moved closer, encasing me with her overly sweet perfume. With her high heels, she was several inches taller than me, but I straightened my spine.

"I hoped I'd get another chance to talk to you. At your wedding, I didn't have much time."

He will fuck you bloody. That's what she'd said and fueled my own terror. She wasn't that much older than me, perhaps twenty, but she had a world of experience on me.

"Maybe you think Luca is satisfied with what you can give him," she began in a low voice. "But I've known him for two years, and he's never settled. I was the only woman he returned to over all that time, because I gave him what he needed."

Two years? Even if he'd been with other women in that time, why had he kept her around?

Grace's smile widened. "I've let him do every kinky thing you can't even imagine, Aria. You don't look like you are willing to take his cock up your stuck-up little frigid ass."

It was enough. I took a step toward her, bringing us too close, and narrowed my eyes at her. I was raised in the mafia world. I had grown up

among predators. I had rammed a knife into a Bratva member. If Grace thought I'd let her intimidate me again, she was thoroughly mistaken. "You will stay away from him," I said quietly but firmly. "The only reason why he used your ass was because he didn't want to see your face. You have always been and will always be replaceable. One among many. You are nothing to him. Cheaper than a whore, that's for sure." I hated that her ugliness brought out my own viciousness, but I couldn't take anymore.

She raised her palm to slap me when a shadow fell over us, and Luca's strong hand clamped around her wrist. He shoved her back from me so she collided with the wall but he didn't release her. His grip on her wrist made her wince, and she cowered under the force of his gaze. He looked murderous.

"She's not worth it," I whispered imploringly.

His mouth pulled into the cruelest smile I'd ever seen on him as he released Grace's wrist. "You won't ever speak to Aria again. You won't go anywhere near her, or you will see a side of me very few have survived."

"Luca, please," she begged, clutching his arm, and I stiffened. "I'd do anything for you. I love you."

He shook her off in disgust. "Don't touch me, whore. You just swallowed my brother's cum; do you really think I want your dirty hands on me?"

He turned to me, and some of the anger slipped away, but Grace wasn't done yet. Her face scrunched up as she leveled her hateful eyes on me. "I wish that guy in Luca's club had raped you when I paid him for it. I bet with roofies in your blood that was the first time you could take all of Luca's cock inside your pussy. It was probably the only time he enjoyed fucking you."

I gasped, but my shock lasted only a second because Luca reached under his jacket for his knife. I wasn't quick enough. He turned and lunged at Grace, thrusting her against the wall and pressing the blade against her throat. The fury on his face halted me only a second, then I rushed toward him and gripped his arm, trying to pull it down but he resisted, and he was too strong for me. His hateful eyes never left Grace as he held the knife against her skin. I didn't much care for Grace, but if Luca killed her here, Senator Parker would call the police, and not all of them were on the Famiglia's payroll.

"Luca, please," I murmured.

"You listen to me, Grace. You will leave New York again and you won't come back. I will say this only once: you will never threaten my wife again, or you will be the first woman I will skin alive. That's a fucking promise." He hit his chest with the hilt of the knife, right where his Famiglia tattoo was. His gaze made me shudder, and Grace finally realized he was being serious. Color drained from her face as she nodded. "And now you will go to your fucking room, and you won't emerge until this fucking party is over." He released her and she ran down the corridor where her room must have been.

Luca turned to face me, sheathing his knife, the remnants of the monster still in his expression.

I exhaled. "God, even I was scared of you. You can be terrifying."

Another chunk of the monster fell off, his expression softening as he regarded me. "So I have been told."

I stepped up to him and put my hands up against his chest. There was no sense in punishing Luca for something Grace had said or done. I'd forgiven him for his slipup long ago. With my touch, the last of Luca's darkness fell

off and the warmth reached his eyes. “Don’t listen to a word she says, Aria. She thrives on spite and lies.”

“Two years?” I asked quietly.

Luca shook his head. “She was one of many, Aria. I only returned to her because…” He stopped himself.

“Because of her missing gag reflex,” I muttered.

“Aria,” Luca said almost angrily, reaching for my hand and pressing it against his chest, over his heart. “I’ve never wanted anyone more than I want you, and not because I have to imagine my aunts naked to stop myself from shooting my cum the moment your perfect lips close around my cock, though that too, but because you make me laugh, because you are kind and because whenever I look at you, I feel something I’ve never felt before: peace.”

I swallowed.

Matteo chose that moment to barge into the corridor. “It’s close to midnight. You lovebirds should make a reappearance.” His eyes narrowed as he took in the way we were facing each other.

I gave Luca a small smile to show him we were okay, and he took my hand and led me back to the party. Shortly after midnight we left. Luca was on edge, and staying any longer would only increase the risk of him losing his temper.

Together we returned to our penthouse to toast the New Year again without dozens of curious eyes on us.

Matteo and I grabbed glasses and a bottle of champagne, and headed out onto the rooftop while Luca searched for snacks. Fireworks were still rising into the sky in the distance. Matteo opened the bottle and poured champagne into the three glasses before he handed one to me. His dark eyes were keen as he regarded me.

“Grace cornered you at the party.”

I didn’t say anything but gave a small nod as I took a sip from my champagne. Then when I was sure my voice would come out strong, I said teasingly, “I hear I’m not the only one she cornered.”

Matteo cracked a grin. “More than cornered,” he said suggestively.

I nodded, looking back out toward the skyline.

“Trust me, no missing gag reflex ever made Luca look at Grace with anything close to the fucking vomit-inducing adoration he shows you when he thinks no one is watching,” Matteo said with his trademark grin. “My brother is hopelessly in love with you, and to be honest I want to have the same drugs you use on him for Gianna so she’ll look at me the same way once we’re married.”

I burst out laughing, and champagne shot out of my mouth and onto Matteo’s shirt. He glanced down at it then back up at me with raised eyebrows. “That was incredibly sexy—no wonder Luca can’t keep his hands off you.”

“I have my moments,” I said with an embarrassed smile.

“What was sexy?” Luca asked sharply as he stepped up to us with a plate loaded with bread and cheese and olives. He shoved it at Matteo, who winked at me. “Possessive husband mode activated.”

Luca circled my waist with his arm. “Matteo, I think you pissed me off enough for one evening. You don’t have to shoot all your ammunition today.”

“I never shoot all my ammunition, Luca,” Matteo said with a grin, wiggling his eyebrows.

I pressed up to Luca, feeling my cheeks heat from embarrassment and the effects of the champagne. Luca sighed, but when he looked down at me, I could tell he was happier than I’d seen him all day.

“And that look is my cue to head out and find someone to shoot my ammunition at,” Matteo muttered, downing his champagne.

Hesitation flickered in Luca’s gaze. They had spent every Sylvester together, and I realized that I had changed things between them too.

“No, stay.” I reached out and grabbed Matteo’s shirt because I didn’t get to grasp his arm and pulled half of it out of his pants. I released him at once.

His eyebrows shot up. “Luca, can you please tell your wife not to rip my clothes off my body? It’s sending out mixed signals.”

I burst out laughing and Luca pressed a kiss to my temple, then shoved his brother. “You wish.”

I smiled. “How did you spend your last Sylvester?”

Matteo rubbed the back of his head, glancing at Luca, who sent him a warning look. I took another gulp of the champagne. “I assume that means women were involved.”

“A few, yeah,” Matteo said with a wink.

“At the same time?”

“Matteo was too drunk to remember,” Luca said firmly, and I rolled my eyes at him but decided to let it drop.

“I never got to see old photos of you from when you were kids.”

Matteo grinned. “Let’s see if we can change that.” He moved back inside and began searching the cupboards.

Luca sighed. “He’s a pain in the ass.”

I touched his arm and his brows drew together, but I didn’t say anything. Maybe Luca thought he had never loved anyone before me but even if he didn’t realize it, he loved his brother. “Come on,” I said. “I want to see you when you were little.”

“I was never little,” Luca objected as he followed me into the living room.

Matteo held up an old photo album and I settled beside him on the sofa. Luca sank down beside me, grimacing at the first photo. It showed him and Matteo at ages three and five, dressed in suits. Luca was already tall but still scrawny, and his face already held a hardness a kid that age shouldn't display. Matteo was holding his brother's hand.

"You are holding hands," I said with a smile.

Luca groaned. I turned the page and both Luca and Matteo tensed. The photo showed Matteo and Luca, wearing the same suits as before, beside a woman with long dark hair. She was staring into the camera with the most hopeless expression I'd ever seen. I could practically feel her despair. Luca's mother had killed herself when he was only nine, and seeing her expression, I wasn't surprised. I quickly turned the pages until I found a photo of Luca in his teens with the most horrible mustache I'd ever seen.

"I'd forgotten your pornstache!" Matteo said, chuckling.

"Pornstache?" I repeated, raising my eyebrows at Matteo. Luca was glaring at his brother.

"Because that's the facial hair many porn actors had."

I took another sip of my champagne even though I was already drunk.

"I was fourteen and thought it would make me look grown up," Luca muttered and turned the page to a photo of him on a yacht in only bathing shorts. The mustache was gone and he was already all muscle, even though he couldn't have been more than sixteen.

I let my eyes wander over him appreciatively and Luca smirked. I couldn't wait for us to be alone.

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chapter 5

ARIA

We didn’t mention the Sylvester party incident again and a few days later, we had to leave for Chicago to attend Dante’s wedding.

My cousin Valentina looked absolutely stunning in her cream sequined wedding dress. The wedding wasn’t a big affair like ours had been, but still, close to two hundred people attended from the Outfit and the Famiglia. I smiled as I watched Dante and Valentina during their first dance. The ballroom of the hotel had been decorated with pink and blush roses, and the atmosphere was almost relaxed.

Luca squeezed my hip. “You didn’t look this happy during our wedding dance.”

I laughed. “I was terrified of you.” Val didn’t look like she was scared of Dante, but she was older than me by five years and had been married before. I supposed the consummation of her marriage didn’t hold the same terror for her.

When the dance floor was opened for the guests, Luca pulled me into his arms and led me along to the music. It still surprised me how well he could dance despite his height. I beamed up at him and his thumb stroked my naked back, the only public display of affection he would probably allow himself. He was still cautious but I didn’t mind, because he never held back with affection when we were alone and that was all that mattered.

As was expected, I had to dance with Dante and Luca with Val. I'd danced with Dante before and barely tensed when he took my hand, but when he pulled me against him and touched his palm to my bare back, I shivered from the too familiar gesture. He, too, tensed at the missing barrier between our skins. That was the problem with backless dresses. Heat rose into my cheeks as I met his eyes.

He gave me a very small smile. "I apologize," he said formally.

"You can't help my dress. Unless you move your hand to an inappropriately low level there is no way for you to reach fabric," I said, hoping to lighten the atmosphere.

The barest hint of amusement showed on Dante's face. "If I do that, your husband will spill blood."

I followed his gaze. Luca kept throwing possessive looks my way as he danced with Val. While Val had looked perfectly fine with Dante, she appeared absolutely tense in Luca's hold.

"Val looked happier dancing with you," I said with a smile. Dante's fingers against my back tightened and his expression darkened. Possessive and dominant, not so different from Luca, when it came down to it.

Matteo took over from Luca and Dante released me. I declined a dance from an Outfit soldier with a quick excuse, not wanting to test Luca's patience and needing something to drink and a break from the possessive dominance surrounding me, but then Val laughed loudly at something Matteo had said. They were dancing closer than was appropriate. Luca narrowed his eyes at his brother, but he wasn't the one I was worried about. Dante had a look in his eyes I knew from Luca.

Ignoring my thirst, I hurried to the dance floor and stopped beside Matteo and Val. "Why don't you dance with me now, Matteo?"

Val’s eyes moved from me to her husband and realization filled her face. She stepped back from Matteo, who sent her a grin before he gripped my hand and jerked me against him.

I gasped from the impact against his muscled chest. My indignant look only made him grin wider, and he pressed his palm without hesitation against my back. He and Gianna would kill each other, that was a given.

For Matteo everything was a game—he thrived on provocation and chaos. With anyone but him I would have worried about Luca’s reaction but since this was Matteo, I relaxed in his tight embrace and let him twirl us around the dance floor.

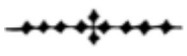
Gianna stood off to the side, a scowl on her face when Matteo winked at her in passing. I dug my nails into his shoulder, bringing his attention back to me. “Don’t hurt her.” It came out sharper than intended, almost an order.

Matteo’s face became guarded. “Or what?”

I squeezed his hand and softened my tone. “Or you will never win her over. She might act all strong, but she has grown up as sheltered as me. Please treat her with kindness.” This was Luca’s brother and I was well aware that kindness wasn’t his forte, but if Luca could be kind to me then I had to hope Matteo could do the same with Gianna.

“I have no intention of hurting Gianna unless she’s into that kind of kinky shit.”

I rolled my eyes at him but when he looked at Gianna again, I could tell that his gaze held a flicker of warmth. Hers didn’t. She looked like she would rather chop her hands off than marry him. It worried me.



LUCA

I rolled over and reached for Aria but touched an empty bedsheet. My eyes flew open and I sat up, looking toward the clock on the nightstand. It was only six thirty in the morning on a Sunday and we'd returned late from Chicago. Where was she? Why wasn't she still asleep?

That I hadn't even noticed her getting out of bed showed how deep my sleep was beside her. Fuck.

I swung my legs out of bed, staggered to my feet and reached for my Beretta and stuffed it into my sweatpants. When I stepped onto the first floor landing, the sound of Aria's humming reached my ears. I went down the stairs and found Aria in our open kitchen, barefoot and dressed in her satin nightgown. The counters and the floor were covered with white powder and so was Aria, her blonde hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

It smelled distinctly burned.

"What's going on?"

Aria cried out and whirled around with a hand over her heart, her eyes wide. The tip of her nose and cheekbones were covered in white too, and my lips turned up at the sight.

A smile broke on her face. "I baked a cake for you." She moved toward me. "Happy birthday, my love."

Fuck, it was my birthday. I'd forgotten. I didn't really celebrate that day. Aria stood on her tiptoes and I bent down, molding our lips together. I tasted flour on her lips—so that was the white powder. I pulled back, letting my eyes assess the mess. "I don't want to sound cruel, but past experiences proved that you being in the kitchen isn't a good idea."

She pursed her lips. "I practiced with Marianna when you weren't around."

"You practiced?"

“I wanted your birthday cake to be perfect,” she said softly. I stared then raised my fingertips and brushed the flour off her cheeks. The spot on her nose would have to stay. She looked too fucking gorgeous for words. She stepped back, took mittens and opened the oven. The cake that she pulled out didn’t look half bad, even though it was on the dark side.

“It’s a chocolate cake with cream-cheese filling,” she said as she set it down on the counter. She grabbed a knife and cut off two pieces, put them on a plate before she set them down in front of me. She pressed up beside me. “I hope you like it.”

I grabbed the fork and speared a piece of the cake then brought it to my mouth, prepared for the worst, but the cake was actually delicious, warm and chocolaty. I didn’t have much of a sweet tooth, but I enjoyed this because Aria had made it for me.

“And?” she asked, her eyes wide and worried.

“Delicious.”

Her answering smile actually made my fucking heart skip a beat.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Three hours?”

I raised my eyebrows. “I didn’t know cake takes that long.”

She blushed. “Well, it doesn’t but I got up early in case something didn’t go to plan, and I burnt the first two cakes—they’re in the trash.”

I chuckled then took another bite. My eyes trailed down her delicate throat to the soft swell of her breasts.

Aria touched my chest then slowly ran her hands down to my stomach, and I set the fork back down on my plate. My skin tightened under her touch, my cock springing to life. Aria’s eyes met mine as she reached for the Beretta in my waistband and pulled it out. With anybody else, my body would have gone into high alert, but with her I didn’t even feel a hint of

unease. She regarded my gun for a moment before she put it down on the counter. I couldn't look away from her face. She slid her hands into my waistband and slowly dragged my sweatpants down over my hips. I hissed when she grazed my cock. She cast her eyes up, and fuck, that look in her eyes, I could feel it right in my dick.

And then she got down on her knees, and I almost came right then. She held my gaze despite the blush spreading on her cheeks as she leaned forward, parting those perfect pink lips and taking my tip into her hot mouth. I had to stop myself from thrusting forward, but I loosened her bun and tangled my hands in her hair as she worked my cock deeper into her mouth. Fuck, my balls swelled seeing it.

She smiled around my cock and I groaned, my fingers tightening against her skull. Slowly she moved back and her fingers curled around me, and then she fucking licked from the base all the way to the top before she swirled that pink tongue around my tip. I jerked, moaning. "Fuck, Aria, you're killing me."

She hummed, looking fucking proud. *That woman. Only mine.*

I had to pull the reins a few times like a randy teenager as her mouth worked my cock, but when Aria cupped my balls while her other hand worked my shaft and my tip hit the back of her throat, I exploded. I gripped the counter as pleasure shot through me and I erupted in her mouth. She had trouble swallowing around me, so I pulled back a bit, my dick twitching. I watched through lidded eyes as she drew back, releasing me, and wiped her mouth. This was the moment she was still the most self-conscious about. I bent down and grabbed her under the armpits and hoisted her up onto the counter before I claimed her mouth for a kiss, plunging my tongue inside, tasting myself on her, and feeling fucking possessive because of it.

Gripping her thighs, I lifted her up and her legs circled my waist. If it weren't for all the flour, I would have fucked her right there on the counters. Instead I turned with her clinging to my torso and walked toward the stairs. Her eyes never left mine as I carried her up the stairs, and with her pussy pressed against my stomach, my cock was recovering quickly. Fuck, I could feel how wet she was. Wet from sucking my cock.

"This was supposed to be only about you," she whispered, but her eyes brimmed with need.

"This is still about me, trust me, because giving you pleasure is the fucking best thing about all this."

We arrived at our bed and I let myself fall forward. Aria squealed but I caught my weight with my palms, smirking down at her. She laughed, and swatted at my back. "You scared me."

I lowered her completely and guided my cock toward her entrance, finding her ready for me, and slowly slid into her. When I was buried to the hilt, I moved down to my elbows, bringing our bodies flush together. Cupping Aria's head, I kissed her as I moved in and out slowly.

Lovemaking. It wasn't something I'd ever thought I'd do but fuck, with Aria I couldn't get enough.

I didn't speed up, neither my thrusts nor my kisses. I made sure to hit deep with every thrust, aiming for that spot that made Aria lose herself. Her eyes held mine as she gasped and moaned, wonder on her gorgeous face. I wanted to guide her over the edge with only my cock again, and she was getting there. My own release was close, even though I'd shot my cum not too long ago.

"Kiss me," she whispered, then gasped as I hit deep.

I took her mouth, slow and sweet, and then she arched up, walls clamping around me, and my balls tightened as my own release hit me hard.

Afterwards, I buried my nose in her hair as I caught my breath. I began to push myself up but Aria tightened her hold on my shoulders, and I stayed on top of her yet raised my eyes to hers.

Love. The emotion was written all across her face, and it still seemed impossible that she could love me because no one ever had. I had been born with cruelty in my veins, had been raised to break others.

“Happy birthday, Luca,” she said quietly. “Our first birthday together.”

“The first of many,” I murmured because no matter what, I would never let her go.

Aria smiled. “You have to open your present.”

My eyebrows rose. “I thought this was my present?”

“Sex and a cake?” Aria asked indignantly. She began wiggling under me and I smirked, not moving an inch.

“Luca,” she said, but I silenced her with another kiss and she relaxed under me. Eventually my curiosity got the better of me and I pushed off her and got to my feet, pulling her along. “So what is it?”

She shook her head and led me out of the bedroom and back downstairs, then into one of our guest bedrooms. There was a rectangular package, about five by fifteen feet in diameter. I stopped, confused. I’d expected expensive alcohol or a watch like most wives bought their husbands, but I had no clue what this was supposed to be.

Aria tugged at my hand and led me closer. “Won’t you unpack it?”

I released her hand and picked up the package. It was only a couple of inches thick, and not as heavy as I’d expected.

Aria laughed. “It doesn’t bite, trust me.”

I ripped away the gift wrap and froze, stunned. It was a canvas with graffiti art. In the background was the skyline of New York, and in the front was the Famiglia motto in red letters.

“When you told me that you like graffiti art from Banksy and other artists, I thought it would be nice to get you art like that for your office in the Sphere.”

I stared at Aria. She bit her lip. Shortly before Christmas we’d walked through New York together and I’d showed her my favorite graffiti, pretty much the only art I gave the slightest fuck about, but I didn’t think she remembered.

“Where did you get it?”

“Romero and I tried to find out who Banksy is but that was impossible, so I contacted a few of the less secretive graffiti artists in the city and asked them to create a piece of art for me.” Aria fell silent. “You don’t like it? I thought something personal would be better than just getting you something expensive like a watch, especially since it feels like you are buying your own gift because it’s all your money…”

I staggered toward her, cupped her face and kissed her fiercely. When I pulled back, her brows puckered with confusion. “It’s our money, Aria, not mine. Everything I own is also yours.”

“So I’m practically Capo,” she said teasingly, and I chuckled.

“You rule over my heart, so in some ways yes.”

I paused because I realized it was the truth. No one had ever held power over me, not like Aria did, and it was the scariest thing in this world because no one could ever find out.

“So you like your present?”

“Fuck yes. It’s perfect. How am I ever going to match up to that for your birthday?”

Aria grinned. “You still have a month to come up with something.”

“Great,” I muttered. “No pressure.”

Her eyes were alight with mirth. “You are a big boy, a tough mobster, a notorious bad boy—I think you can deal.”

I leaned down, my voice low and dark. “Bad boy, hmm?”

She circled my neck with her arms. “I really don’t know why people fear you—you’re kind of cute.”

I snorted because nobody had ever called me that, and nobody would if they knew what was good for them. “They fear me because I *am* a bad boy, love.”

Bad didn’t even begin to cover it.

Aria nodded with a small smile. “I know, and you know what?” She lowered her voice. “In the bedroom I like it sometimes if you act like a bad boy.”

Good Lord, Aria. I kissed her hard.

Aria would always see only my tame side.

ARIA

“Damn it!” Luca’s shout made me jerk awake. The mattress shifted under his weight and I turned around, blinking back sleep. Luca was getting dressed, his phone wedged between his shoulder and ear as he pulled up his pants.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Fuck!”

I sat up, worried. Luca put down his cell and put a shirt over his gun holster, then turned to me, grimacing. “Someone threw a Molotov cocktail into one of the Famiglia’s whorehouses. Two whores were burnt badly, and all the furniture burnt down. The police and the fire department are there. I have to go and limit the damage.”

I nodded slowly, stifling my disappointment. He moved toward me, gave me a quick kiss then walked out.

I bit my lip, shoving down my hurt. It was my birthday.

I slid out of bed, reached for my mobile and saw Gianna's message. The moment she saw I was online, my phone rang. After I'd talked to Gianna, Fabiano and Lily, I felt better and got dressed.

I knew Luca needed to take care of Famiglia business if he wanted to be a good Capo, and yet I wondered if he had forgotten my birthday altogether. I headed downstairs where Romero was sitting at the counter. He smiled when he spotted me and got up. "Happy birthday, Aria."

I offered him a shaky smile in return and his expression softened further. "Luca will be back as soon as he's done."

I gave a small shrug and poured myself a coffee. Loneliness washed over me. I didn't have any friends in New York. As the wife of the Capo people in our circles didn't treat me like a normal human being, and I couldn't really be friends with outsiders. Swallowing my emotions, I took a sip of my coffee.

The elevator binged and Romero stepped in front of me but relaxed when Marianna walked in, carrying a cake. Her dark gray hair was secured with a hairnet as usual, and her dress strained over her plump body and ample breasts. Her motherly face pulled into a wide smile and upon putting the cake down, she pulled me into a tight hug. "Happy birthday, *bambina*. I baked almond cake for you. Luca told me it's your favorite." She frowned at Romero. "Where is he anyway?"

"Business," Romero said simply.

Marianna didn't ask any questions.

"Luca asked you to bake the cake?"

“He did.” Marianna cut off three slices of the cake, then took out plates and handed Romero and me each one and kept one for herself. We dug in, and I had to admit the cake was better than anything I’d eaten in a very long time. Marianna was a goddess in the kitchen.

Marianna touched my cheek. “You look sad. Why don’t you go out and have some fun with Romero?”

I wanted to spend the day with Luca but since that wasn’t going to happen, I gave a nod. Romero took me out for lunch to a nice restaurant, and afterwards I went all trophy wife and spent thousands in Century21, my favorite department store in Manhattan. We returned to the penthouse after a quick dinner in a small bistro. I didn’t bother removing the new clothes from the shopping bags; instead I grabbed a wool blanket and a book and headed out onto the terrace, where I curled up on the chair. Romero didn’t join me, probably picking up on my dark mood. I let my gaze stray over the skyline, a few tears slipping out, and I pulled up my legs and wrapped my arms tightly around them.

The sound of the door sliding open drew my eyes toward the French windows and Luca stepped out onto the terrace, his expression twisting with regret as his eyes settled on my face. I quickly wiped away my tears and stood, but Luca picked me up and kissed me. “Happy birthday, *principessa*. I wish I could have spent the day with you.”

“Romero kept me busy,” I said with a small shrug.

Luca shook his head. “Not good enough.” He carried me into the apartment and up into our bedroom. My eyes settled on the bed. A bouquet of white roses and a parcel lay on top of it. I smiled and kissed Luca’s throat before he set me down. I smelled the roses, then took the parcel and unwrapped it. Inside was a red velvet box, which I opened. A rose-gold bar

bracelet sat on a gray cushion. Nineteen diamonds were embedded in the smooth rose-gold surface.

“Turn it around,” Luca said quietly.

I did and found words engraved into the inside of the bracelet.

In the darkest hour you are my light

Swallowing, I looked up into Luca’s warm eyes. He gripped his shirt, pulled it over his head and turned around. I froze when I saw the new tattoo on his shoulder blade, mirroring his Famiglia tattoo. The skin was still red.

I read the intricate black inked letters: *I’ll go where you go no matter how dark the path*

The words I’d said to Luca shortly after our wedding. He remembered them. I sucked in a deep breath, pressing my lips together, but not crying was a losing battle. His two tattoos on both sides of his heart. Luca turned and stepped close to me, brushing away the tears. He pressed my palm against his Famiglia tattoo over his heart. “My oath came first, but the words on my back mean more.”

I swallowed. He wasn’t supposed to say something like that. For a Made Man the Famiglia came first, and even more so for a Capo. I nodded, brushed my lips over his. “Those words on your back, I mean them, Luca. I will follow you anywhere. Your darkness doesn’t scare me. I love you, your strength and loyalty, your tenderness and protectiveness. I love your gentle side, but just as much I love your darkness. I’ll love you in your darkest hour, I’ll love you even when you are weak, and if you need me to be your light, I will. I love every piece of you, Luca.”

He crushed me to his chest and I held him as tightly. His love was the greatest gift of all.

It was April when Lily and Gianna came to visit. From the moment I'd seen Gianna, I knew something was up, but we didn't get the chance to talk until one evening when Luca and Matteo were out on business and Romero was busy playing Scrabble with Lily. "You're up to something, aren't you?" I asked her as we enjoyed the view over New York from the rooftop terrace.

Gianna didn't immediately reply, and that wasn't normal for her. "I can't do this, Aria. I want out. Out of this world. Out of my arranged marriage. Just out."

I'd suspected something along this line but now that she voiced it aloud, worry and fear slammed into me. "You want to run?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

Gianna slanted me a look. There was no hint of doubt on her face. "Absolutely. Ever since the Bratva attacked the mansion and I saw what Matteo is capable of, I knew I had to run."

"It's not just Matteo, you know that, right? He isn't any worse than any other Made Man." Matteo could be funny and charming. I was sure Gianna and he could be happy if she allowed herself to let him in, but I knew her, knew how stubborn she could be. She wouldn't let me talk her into giving Matteo a chance.

"That makes it even worse. I know that pretty much all the men in our world are capable of horrible things, and one day even Fabi will be, and I hate it, hate every second I'm trapped in this messed-up world."

"I thought you and Matteo were getting along better. You didn't try to rip each other's heads off today."

"He's trying to manipulate me. Didn't you see how easily he could make Lily forget her nervousness around him?"

“It could be worse. Most men wouldn’t have forgiven you for giving them such a hard time, but he really seems to like you.” I wasn’t sure if Luca would have let me mess with him like that.

“Are you on his side?”

I had no intention of choosing sides. “I’m not on his side. I’m just trying to show you an alternative to running away.”

“Why? You know I’ve never wanted this life. Why are you trying to make me stay?”

I gripped her wrist, getting angry. “Because I don’t want to lose you, Gianna!”

“You won’t lose me.”

“Yes, I will. Once you’ve run away, we can’t ever see each other again, maybe not even talk unless we figure out a way to do it without risking the mob tracing you.”

“I know,” Gianna whispered. “You could come with me.”

In the past I’d often resented the golden cage I’d been raised in, and even now I sometimes wondered how it would feel to wander through New York without Romero, to go to college and live life by only my own rules. “I can’t.”

She turned away from me. “Because you love Luca.”

There was a hint of disapproval in her voice, but I wouldn’t defend my feelings. Loving Luca wasn’t something I would never feel bad about. “Yes, but that’s not the only reason. I can’t leave Fabi and Lily behind either, and I’ve made peace with this life. It’s all I’ve ever known. I’m okay with it.”

“Do you think I’m abandoning them if I leave?”

“They’ll understand. Not everyone is cut out for a life in this world. You’ve always wanted to live a normal life, and they’ll still have me. You have to think of yourself. I just want you to be happy.”

“I don’t think I can be happy here.”

“Because you don’t want to marry a killer, because you can’t live with what Matteo does.”

“No,” she said quietly. “Because I can see myself being okay with it.”

I regarded her face. “What’s wrong with that?” I knew what Luca was, what he was capable of. I knew he wouldn’t change and I didn’t want him to because I loved the man he was now.

“Are you okay with what Luca does? Don’t you ever lie awake at night feeling guilty for being married to a man like him?”

“We come from a family of men like him. Do you want me to feel guilty?”

“No. But normal people would feel guilty. Can’t you see how messed up we are? I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to spend my life with a man who carves up his enemies.”

Luca always claimed I was pure and innocent, but I wasn’t, not by normal standards.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to make you feel bad. I just…I know I have to risk it. I have to try to get away from all this and live a life without all the violence and messed-up morals. I’ll always regret it if I don’t.”

“You know you can’t ever come back. There’s no going back once you’ve run. Even if Matteo would forgive you for insulting him like that, the Outfit would be responsible for your punishment until your marriage. And running away from the mafia is betrayal.”

“I know.”

“The Outfit punishes betrayal with death. Because you aren’t a Made Man, they might decide to go easy on you and throw you into one of their whorehouses or marry you off to someone far worse than Matteo.”

“I know.”

I gripped Gianna's shoulder because I didn't think she did. "Do you really? Few people risk running from the mob and there's a reason for it. Most people get caught."

"Most people but not all of them."

"Have you ever heard of someone who escaped the mob successfully?"

"No, but I doubt anyone would tell us about them. Neither Father, nor Matteo or Luca have any interest in putting ideas in our heads."

I dropped my hands, sighing. "You are really determined to go through with this."

"Yes."

"Okay," I said, because I knew there was nothing I could do to change Gianna's mind and I didn't want her to start keeping secrets from me. "You can't do it alone. If you want any chance at succeeding you'll need my help."

"No," she said. "I can do it on my own."

"If I help you to run, I'll betray the Famiglia and by doing so my husband," I whispered. Luca would see it as betrayal. He'd been brought up with the conviction that his word would be law, that not following his command was betrayal.

"You are right. And I can't let you take that risk."

I took her hand. "No, I will help you. I'm your only choice. And if anyone can make it, then it's you. You never wanted to be part of all this."

"Aria, you said it yourself, what I'm doing is betrayal and the mob deals harshly with people who betray them. Luca isn't the forgiving type."

"Luca won't hurt me." Gianna looked doubtful but I knew those words to be true, and not just since he'd inked my words into his skin. "He won't. If Salvatore Vitiello were still alive, things would be different. I'd have been under his jurisdiction, but Luca is Capo and he won't punish me."

“Maybe his men won’t leave him a choice. He’s a new Capo and if he looks weak, his men might revolt. Luca won’t risk his power, not even for you. The Famiglia comes first to Made Men.”

“Trust me,” I said.

“I trust you. It’s Luca whom I don’t trust.”

“And if you think about it, I wouldn’t really be betraying the Famiglia. You are still part of the Outfit until you marry Matteo. That means what I’m doing is a betrayal of the Outfit at most, but I’m not bound to them, so I can’t betray them.”

“Luca might not see it that way. Even if you aren’t betraying the Famiglia, you’re still going behind Luca’s back. Not to mention that Matteo will probably move Heaven and earth to find me.”

“True. He’ll hunt you.”

“He’ll eventually lose interest.”

Knowing Matteo’s obsession with my sister, I doubted it. “Perhaps. But I wouldn’t count on it. We have to make sure he can’t find you.”

“Aria, I shouldn’t have come to you with this. You can’t get involved.”

“Don’t try to talk me out of it. I’d feel guilty if I didn’t help you and you got caught,” I told her.

“And I will feel guilty if you get in trouble for helping me.”

“I’m helping you. End of story.”

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chapter 6

One month later, LUCA

“The Sphere is still going strong, but the Pergola is closing in. Despite the Russians trying to piss in our pond, we’re still making a shitload of cash with our clubs. And Pergola will be the hottest club in town next year, I can feel it,” Matteo said as he checked last month’s earnings from our dance clubs.

I didn’t really give a shit if we owned the hottest clubs in the city. Our main business was drugs, and the numbers in my laptop told me that we weren’t selling as much as we could. “Heroin is slowing. These new designer drugs are what people are all over,” I said. “We need to make sure our distributor delivers on time. I don’t give a fuck if the labs are producing as fast as possible. It’s not fast enough. Pay him a visit.”

Matteo’s lips twisted in a creepy as fuck smile. “Will do.”

I shook my head with a smile of my own. “You sick fuck.”

“Takes one to know one.”

My phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and looked down at the screen. *Romero*. “Yes, Romero?”

“Sandro is passed out in the kitchen. Aria and Gianna are gone.”

My pulse rate doubled. *The Russians.* “Repeat that.” I closed the laptop and straightened in my chair. Matteo’s eyes slanted over to me, vigilance banishing his grin.

“He’s been drugged and they tied him up with tape. One of the cars is gone. Gianna and Aria must have packed some bags because clothes are missing in the wardrobe. There’s no sign of an attack. They must have run off.”

Run off? My eyes found the graffiti painting Aria had given me four months ago, which hung on the wall behind my desk.

“What’s going on?” Matteo asked, closing his laptop and putting it away.

I stood. Fury was simmering under my skin, and another emotion. A weak emotion I wouldn’t give space. An emotion I’d never bothered with until Aria, and now she was gone. She was fucking *gone*. “Romero found Sandro drugged and tied up on the floor of the penthouse. Aria and Gianna are gone.”

Matteo rose slowly. “You’re fucking kidding.”

I got into his face, so fucking angry, it was burning me up inside. Angry, and worried. Fucking worried because my wife was gone. Aria had run. Run from me. “Do you think I would joke about something like that?”

“I thought Aria was in love with you,” Matteo said snidely.

My fingers itched to close around his throat. To crush something. Fuck, it had felt so good when I’d crushed the last man’s throat. But *Matteo* hadn’t betrayed me. I should have wanted to hurt my wife for running from me, and yet I didn’t. Fuck. Damn you, Aria. Damn you for making me care.

I stormed out of the basement of the Sphere. Some of my men lingering at the bar watched me curiously. Others got up as if to join me on whatever crusade I was on. But I couldn’t risk them finding out that my own wife had run off, that I couldn’t even control the woman at my side.

Love. The root of weakness. That’s what our fucking father had called it. I didn’t like the man, had *hated* him with every fiber of my being, but

perhaps he'd been right for once. Aria was turning me into a fool, and I had fucking allowed her to do it.

Matteo followed close behind me.

If he hadn't wanted the fucking redhead, then nothing of this would have happened. The whole thing was no doubt Gianna's fucking idea.

"This is Gianna's fault. This girl is the root of every problem. Why couldn't you stay the fuck away from her like I told you?"

"Probably for the same reason why you let Aria play with you," Matteo muttered.

Fuck it. Matteo was my brother. If other men started thinking the same way, I'd have to make a bloody statement—again. All because of Aria. I got into my car and Matteo mounted his bike, then we were off to meet with Romero.

He was waiting for us in my penthouse, next to a delirious Sandro. That asshole should have watched Aria and Gianna; instead, he let two untrained women knock him out. He didn't meet my fucking gaze, and I focused on Romero before I ended up killing that useless fucker. "Spill," was all I got out of my fucking tight throat.

"Ten thousand dollars and two passports are gone. Looks like they planned this over a long period of time."

I nodded, trying to mask what this information did to me. Aria had told me she loved me. *I* had told her I loved her, had treated her as well as I knew how to do, had never hurt her, and now this?

I'll go where you go no matter how dark the path

Had the last few months been a fucking show? But nobody could be that good an actress. This was Gianna. Fucking Gianna's fault.

"We need to go looking for them," Matteo muttered, as if I didn't know that.

I glared. “And where do you want to begin? They could be anywhere. They will hardly take their fucking mobiles with them.”

“Might be worth a try anyway,” Romero suggested quietly.

I tried to calm myself and think straight, then gave a tight nod, before I took out my phone and opened the tracking app. And a second later Aria’s cell popped up. Surprise, then relief followed by suspicion shot through me. She was heading out of the city, up north.

“Do you think that’s them?” Matteo peered down at my cell. “They are too clever to keep their phones on them.”

“Perhaps this is a ruse, but it’s all we’ve got right now,” I said. Before Matteo and I headed out to hunt our women, I told Romero, “Call me the moment you’ve got news.”

ARIA

I drove for a long time, first in one direction, then in the other. I was sure they had discovered Sandro by now and knew that Gianna had run off. Would Luca think I’d gone with her? That the words I’d spoken to him had been a lie? I wasn’t sure. My heart ached when I thought about it. Luca wasn’t a man who trusted easily, or at all. But I had his trust. Perhaps not anymore.

I glanced at the clock in the dashboard. Gianna’s flight to Schiphol had left almost one hour ago. I needed to get home. If they’d tracked my mobile, they should have been on the wrong trace by now and not suspect that Gianna had taken a plane. Luca had tried to call me several times. He was probably furious.

I turned the car and headed back to Manhattan, my heartbeat picking up the closer I got to my home.

The moment I entered the underground parking garage, the desk clerk watching everything on his monitors was probably already notifying Luca of my whereabouts.

I took the elevator up to our penthouse. When the doors slid open, Romero was waiting for me. He shook his head, something close to anger on his face. He'd never openly displayed anger toward me. He lifted his cell to his ear but didn't take his eyes off me.

I didn't have to ask whom he was calling. I walked past him toward the windows and glanced out. Gianna was on a plane to freedom. She'd be landing in Amsterdam in a few hours, where she'd start a new life. Away from all of this. Away from the mafia and arranged marriages. Away from golden cages and man-made rules.

I hoped Gianna would be clever enough to evade her pursuers, because there was no doubt in my mind that my father would send his men out to catch her. And I had a feeling Matteo wouldn't let her slip from his fingers that easily either. She would have to find someone who could give her a new identity. In this country, nobody would go against the mafia, except for the Bratva, and contacting them would have put the final nail in our coffins. But most of all I hoped Gianna would find what she was longing for.

"Luca, she's here," Romero said finally. "No, alone. Yes. I will."

Romero came up to me. I glanced over my shoulder at his tall form. "I won't run. You don't have to stand two steps behind me to make sure of it," I said jokingly.

Romero didn't smile. He took another step closer, closer than he usually came, his brown eyes hardening. "Luca is Capo. And he's the best there

ever was. Because he rules without mercy. Because he rewards those who are loyal. Because he protects those deserving of protection."

I turned to him fully, stunned by the fierceness of his words and not sure where he was going with them.

"You betrayed him." He practically spat the words at me.

"I didn't—"

Romero interrupted me. "You went behind his back and ran off. I don't care why. In our world that means betrayal and you should know better, Aria."

I stared up at him, shaken. Was that how Luca saw my actions as well?

"With anyone else, Luca wouldn't hesitate to deal out harsh punishment. Betrayal means death, torture at the very least. But you are certain you are safe," he said. He leaned closer, and again I was reminded that the man in front of me was a killer despite his easygoing nature. "Never forget that Luca is still a Capo who needs to keep face in front of his men. Don't push him too far. Don't force him into doing something neither of you will recover from."

I swallowed, glancing down at my bracelet.

In the darkest hour you are my light

Romero wasn't threatening me as I'd first thought. He was worried. I hadn't thought it was that big a deal.

No, that wasn't quite right. I'd suspected how bad it would be if I helped Gianna run, but I couldn't not help. She was my sister and I loved her.

The door to the guest bedroom opened and Sandro stumbled out, his shirt pulled out of his trousers and crinkly. He looked pale and disoriented. When his eyes settled on me, anger flashed across his face, then he glanced

at Romero beside me, and lowered his head. I had wounded his pride, which was the worst shame possible for a Made Man.

“Are you okay?” I asked him, feeling bad for having drugged him, but he wouldn’t have let Gianna and me leave.

He walked toward the sofa and sank down. He leaned back slowly but didn’t say anything.

“Is he hurt?” I asked Romero when it became clear that Sandro was determined to ignore me.

Romero shrugged. “The drug haze will be the least of his problems. His screwup will cause him bigger trouble, believe me. Luca doesn’t tolerate incompetence.”

Sandro winced visibly.

“Luca won’t punish him, will he? I have to talk to him—”

“No,” Romero said sharply. “You should start thinking about self-preservation, Aria. Be careful.”

I snapped my mouth shut.

The elevator jerked into motion. My eyes darted to the screen. It was going down to the underground garage. *Luca.*

My stomach tightened. I was nervous. Romero’s words had left an impact. But I knew Luca. And he knew me. He would understand. I hadn’t gone against him. I’d only helped Gianna. Right?

I realized it might look different from the outside. God. Fear began bubbling in my stomach. I turned back to the windows, needing time to control my expression.

Had I messed up everything?

The elevator stopped on our floor and the sound of Luca and Matteo in some kind of argument reached me. In the window I could see Luca’s tall

frame towering above his brother. Matteo was tall, but Luca was…Luca. Magnificent. His gaze found mine in the reflection of the window.

I swallowed.

He was stalking my way. He didn't say anything. I was about to apologize when his strong fingers clamped down on my forearm and he turned me around. I bit back a gasp. His grip was tight, though I knew he must have been restraining himself. I peeked up at him, and shivered. His face was a mask of barely controlled anger. He still didn't say anything, and that made me realize how bad the situation truly was.

Matteo advanced on me. "Where's Gianna?"

I ignored him, caught in Luca's gaze.

"Answer," Luca said quietly.

I tried to pull from his grip but he didn't let go. Suddenly a hint of anger flared up in me. He was showing his power in front of everyone, trying to act all macho and Capo.

"She's gone," I said.

"Oh really," Matteo snarled. "Don't you think we know that? But where did she go? You ran off together, planned everything together."

"I don't know." I shrugged. "We decided it was better if I didn't know."

"Bullshit." Matteo smiled cruelly. "You know exactly where she is."

"Aria." Luca's voice was steel as he brought my attention back to him. "So far no one knows about this. Not even your father and the Outfit. Soon we'll have to tell them that your sister escaped while under my protection."

It would make him look bad. He was Capo. He wanted to appear invincible. I hated these power struggles. Why couldn't men just let it go?

I pressed my lips together.

Matteo growled. "I'll find her anyway, if I have to search every club in New York. She wants to provoke me. If I find her fucking around with

another guy, she'll regret it."

Anger surged through me. "You will never find her. She's too far away. And Gianna won't come back. Never."

"Too far away," Matteo said with a look at Luca. "So you do know where she is."

I tensed. "It doesn't matter. I won't tell you."

Sandro let out a snort.

Luca's expression darkened even further. Matteo stepped very close to us. He gave his brother an imploring look. "We need to find her. Not just because I want her, but because it will reflect badly on the Famiglia." Matteo evaluated me. His expression scared me. I'd grown to like him. Perhaps I'd too easily forgotten what kind of man he was, what kind of men both he and Luca were. "We need to get the information from her."

I swallowed. I was about to tell him again that I wouldn't say anything when I realized where he was going with his arguments.

"If you can't do it, Luca, let me handle this," Matteo said in an imploring murmur. "I don't think I'll have to hurt her too much. She's not used to withstand pain."

I jerked in Luca's grip. My eyes flew from Matteo to Luca. "You can't be serious," I whispered harshly. I could tell that Romero and Sandro were watching in interest.

"Silence," Luca growled, and I sucked in a breath. He turned his glare back to his brother. "I am your Capo, Matteo. I will handle my own wife. You won't lay a finger on her."

Matteo shrugged. "Then handle her, *Capo*," he said in a defiant tone. Was he openly challenging Luca as Capo? Was he losing his mind? Was he that obsessed with Gianna to risk even his relationship to Luca?

But what had I done? I had risked my relationship to Luca for Gianna as well. Yet, I had to believe that it was different. I'd done it out of sisterly love. Matteo wanted Gianna out of possessiveness.

Luca pulled me away from his brother and toward the steps leading up to the second floor. "Luca," I began, but he tightened his grip in warning and I fell silent. Everyone was watching us. What needed to be said was something that was only between Luca and me.

I followed him inside the bedroom, then tried again. "Luca—"

He banged the bedroom door shut behind us and pulled me forcefully against him. The air whooshed out of my lungs from the impact against his muscled torso.

If I hadn't been married to Luca for months now, I would have cowered under his scowl, but I loved him and he loved me. I had to trust in that.

"Where is Gianna?" he growled.

I shivered at the undercurrent of fury in his voice.

"I won't tell you. No matter what you do."

He kissed my throat, backing me up against the closed door. "Don't say that." When he raised his head, his expression had changed. He'd raised his barriers, shut me off. He stared down at me, then he pinned my wrists above my head, his grip on the verge of being painful. I winced. A joyless smile twisted his mouth. His eyes were guarded like he was considering me anew, like he was trying to gauge me. Calculating.

Fear settled in the pit of my stomach. Fear of what he'd do. But even worse: fear that I was losing him. That's I'd lost the trust of a man who'd never before allowed himself to trust someone as much as me.

Luca nodded. "That look in your eyes. I've seen it thousands of times in other people's eyes, but it's been a while with you."

His thumb pressed against my wrist and I could feel my pulse hammering against it, but I couldn't do anything against it.

"I'm a young Capo, Aria. Younger than most of the older Underbosses like. Many of them want me gone. They are lying in wait for a sign of weakness." He tilted his head. I tried to glimpse past the mask he'd put on, but for once I couldn't. "Don't be that weakness."

I tried to free myself from his grip, but he didn't budge. He was much stronger than I. Finally I narrowed my eyes at him. I wasn't one of his soldiers, and most definitely not a weakness. "I'm not a weakness. Let me go and stop being cruel."

"I'm not being cruel to you," he growled. "You have never witnessed my cruel side, Aria. You've never seen anything close to it. If you think this is the extent of my cruelty, then you don't know me at all." He shook his head. "You are a weakness I can't afford. It would be easy to change it. I know it wouldn't take much to make you give up your secrets. Not because you don't want to keep them, but because I'm too good at breaking people. I could break you so easily."

In the months of our marriage he'd tried to keep me out of the business, but I wasn't stupid.

"I know," I whispered.

You wouldn't even have to lay a hand on me to do it.

"You don't know, that's the fucking problem. I've burnt and beaten and cut. I've strangled and drowned people. I have done every horrendous thing you only have nightmares about, Aria. Gianna's destination is less than a minute away if I try."

By God, I knew. I had seen glimpses of what he was capable of when he'd dealt with others. I had seen the blood, had seen the darkness and excited glimmer in his eyes. I knew exactly what kind of man he was. But

God help me, I loved him despite it all. Loved him more than anything else in this world. I forced my body to relax in his grip even though it was the hardest thing I'd ever done. Luca felt it too, and his brows drew together.

"Then do what you must do, Luca," I whispered, and I could say it without hesitation because I knew no matter how angry he was, no matter how dark the times were, he would never hurt me. I trusted him completely.

He smiled joylessly and leaned closer, his thumb pressing against my wrist once. "This betrays your true feelings, Aria. I know you are scared."

My body fears you, but not my heart. "I am," I admitted. "But not of the pain and not of you." That was a lie—the prospect of pain scared me very much—and we both knew it but I continued, "The thing that scares me most is that you won't trust me again, that I ruined the best thing in my life, that I hurt the person I love the most."

Luca's expression could have brought down worlds with its intensity. He released me like he had been burnt and whirled around, then he stalked into the bathroom. I knew I shouldn't have but I followed. He was clutching the washbasin, glowering at his reflection. His gray eyes shone with fury. When he spotted me in the mirror, he jerked his hands up and ripped the washbasin off the wall. "Damn you, Aria. Damn your fucking love. Damn it all." He released the washbasin and it fell to the ground, broken. I took a step in his direction because with him I simply couldn't stay away.

"You are turning me into a fucking fool," he snarled.

And then he was upon me, tall and imposing. He gripped my hips and lifted me off the ground, then hoisted me up against the tiled wall. His body pressed up against me and his mouth crashed down on mine. I tasted blood, not sure if it was mine or his, and not caring. His tongue claimed my mouth without mercy, and I returned the kiss. His fingers clamped down on my thighs painfully as he held me up. He shoved my skirt up then ripped away

my panties. I heard him undo his belt and unzip his pants, and then he thrust into me in one hard stroke. My gasp was swallowed by his mouth. He didn't wait for my body to adapt like usual; instead he started pounding into me hard and fast, his hands gripping my ass, his mouth unrelenting. And I surrendered to him completely. I clung to his neck, ecstasy mingling with pain as Luca took me harder than ever before.

He panted, eyes angry, as he got closer to the edge. He stopped kissing me and only stared into my eyes with the most intense look I'd ever seen. He still loved me. I hadn't lost him.

And then he tensed, his cock expanding in me, and he growled, his head falling forward. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and allowed myself to cry as I clung to him and listened to his harsh breathing and erratic heartbeat. His musky scent filled my nose. Luca exhaled sharply, muscles softening under my hands before he lifted me gently and pulled out slowly. I couldn't help but wince. I was sore. Luca set me down and our eyes met. Slowly his gaze traveled down to his cock, which was smeared with a bit of pink. I couldn't describe the look on his face then. Regret. Sorrow. Anger. He sank to his knees and pressed his face against my stomach.

"Damn it, Aria," he rasped. "I swore I'd never hurt you."

"It's nothing," I said.

He shook his head, and for a while we stayed like that: his face resting against me, my hands in his hair. "I am your husband and your Capo," he said eventually, before he pressed a kiss to the soft flesh of my stomach and his gray eyes met mine. "Don't ever betray me again."

It was half order, half plea. There was only so much his love for me could endure; I understood that now. He was a predator, a monster. He was mine. "I won't," I promised, and I hoped I could keep that promise.

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chapter 7

LUCA

I chanced a last look at Aria. Her back was turned to me. She was naked from head to toe, every inch of that perfect porcelain skin that only I got to touch on display. Her shoulder blades and butt cheeks were red from where they'd rubbed against the tiles when I'd fucked her.

Angry fucking. That was something I'd never wanted to do with Aria, but something had snapped in me, and I hated myself for it. Hated that I'd hurt her even if she said it was nothing. She was mine to protect. She was mine, fucking mine until the fucking end. She hadn't run, and she wouldn't. I knew that now.

Turning away, I opened the bedroom door and headed downstairs as I pulled my cell out of my pocket to call a few contacts at the airport. I couldn't waste any time. Word about Gianna's flight would spread like wildfire, and I would have to make sure it didn't turn into something I couldn't control. My uncles and my aunts' husbands all had their eyes set on my position. They thought they could be better as Capo. Gottardo had told me to my face. The only reason no one had made a move yet was that they quarreled among each other, but I couldn't count on that to last forever. Perhaps they'd come to an agreement at some point. I needed to make sure that my men were too loyal to me to give them any kind of support. Appearing weak wouldn't do.

Matteo was glaring daggers at me when he spotted me. “Don’t tell me you couldn’t get anything out of her.”

I sent him a scowl in return. He was my brother but he was starting to piss me off. He needed to stop the disrespect when others were around. “The only thing I know is that Gianna took a plane from JFK. Aria won’t tell me anything, but our informants will let me know where Gianna is going soon enough.”

“Great,” he muttered, his eyes sliding back up to the bedroom door before he turned to me. I didn’t like that look one fucking bit. “And then what? Aria knows Gianna’s plan. They told each other everything. The only way to find Gianna is through your wife.”

Romero and Sandro were watching us, and I got into Matteo’s face. “She won’t tell me anything.”

The fucker actually tried to walk past me up the stairs. “Then let me have a word with her.”

I shoved him backwards, snarling. “You will stay away from her, Matteo.” Brother or not, if he got anywhere near Aria, if he hurt as much as a hair on her body, I’d end him.

“*You* let her steal *your* money, *your* passports. You let her attack our men.” He pointed at Sandro, who was still staring. “You let her make a fool out of you and betray you. You should want to punish her. You are Capo.”

I brought us chest to chest so Matteo had to tilt his head back. “Aria is my wife. It’s none of your business how I deal with her. I told you that Gianna meant trouble but you didn’t want to listen. You should have never asked for her hand, but you had to think with your cock,” I growled.

He stalked out onto the roof terrace. It was better that way. We would have been at each other’s throats soon.

Turning to my men, I told Sandro, “Leave. I don’t have time to deal with you now. Not a single word about this to anyone.” He pushed off the sofa at once and hurried toward the elevator and disappeared, fucking relieved that he didn’t get his ass handed to him today. Then I turned to Romero. “Go call Sami, and find out where Gianna is heading.” Romero gave a quick nod, then pulled out his phone and headed for the kitchen area.

With a sigh, I raised my mobile to my ear, hating what I had to do now. After a few rings, Scuderi picked up. “Luca, I didn’t expect your call.” There was a hint of suspicion in the asshole’s voice. And right he was. We had messed up. I had messed up.

“I have bad news. Gianna ran off.”

There was silence on the other end. Then, finally, “Ran off?” Scuderi sounded as if he wanted to reach through his phone and strangle me. “You swore that you’d protect her. I trusted your word. In Chicago the word of a Capo means something.”

Fuck him. As if things always went according to Dante’s plan. “Your daughter isn’t exactly easy to guard, as you very well know. It isn’t the first time she’s acted up.” I tried to keep my voice civil—after all, it was one of my men who had fucked up and let himself get drugged.

“What about Aria, did she help her sister?”

He didn’t need to know that Aria had been involved. It was bad enough as it was. No need to add fuel to the fire. “No, she didn’t know anything. Matteo will go search for Gianna immediately. She won’t be gone for long.”

“I will send two of my own men with him. I don’t trust you to handle this on your own.”

I had to bite my tongue not to insult him. We needed peace between the Outfit and the Famiglia. “That’s understandable, but I assure you Matteo will find her. He’s very intent on marrying her.”

“Still? She could be whoring around as we speak.”

I doubted Gianna would use the plane ride to fuck a random guy; she’d be busy trying to figure out a way to stay ahead of us. But later? Yeah, she would spread her legs, no doubt about it, but that wasn’t my problem.

Romero appeared in my field of vision and whispered, “Amsterdam. Schiphol.”

“We know she took a plane to Amsterdam. That’s where Matteo will be heading with the next plane.”

“I’ll make arrangements so my men will be there as soon as possible. Dante won’t be happy about this. That I can promise you. This will have to be discussed in depth.”

I didn’t give a fuck about Dante. New York was my concern, the Famiglia was. “Sure.” I hung up, stifling the urge to throw my phone at the wall. Instead I used it to book Matteo on the next flight. It was the worst time to lose my best soldier. All because of Gianna and Aria. A new wave of blinding fury rolled over me, and I really thought I’d lose my shit, but I needed to keep my calm and stay in control. I was Capo.

I headed outside and stopped beside Matteo, who was braced against the banister with a determined expression on his face. He would catch Gianna. It was only a matter of time. “I called Scuderi. He’s furious and blames us, of course.”

“Of course,” he said quietly.

“He’s sending two of his men after Gianna.”

He still wasn’t looking my way. He was still pissed because I’d spared Aria. As if he would have tortured Gianna to get information. We were killers, maybe even sadists, but definitely not toward the women we cared about.

“I will go with them,” he said.

“I figured you would. I told Scuderi as much. You will meet them in Amsterdam.”

That got his attention. He straightened and turned to me. “Amsterdam?”

I nodded. “I got word that she took a plane to Schiphol.”

“When do I leave?” He was going into hunter mode.

“Four hours.”

“I need to leave sooner.”

“Impossible. I tried everything I could.”

“Damn it. Gianna will be long gone when I arrive.”

“You’ll find her. You are the best hunter I know. She doesn’t stand a chance.”

He touched my shoulder. “You let me go, even though you need me here.”

The Famiglia needed him. I needed him more. The Bratva was a pain in the ass. My traitorous family was breathing down my neck. “You aren’t of much use to me if all you can think about is Gianna.” Even my trust in Matteo had its limits. He didn’t need to know how much I relied on his support.

“It could take weeks,” he said. “I won’t return until I’ve caught her.”

“I know. If Aria had run, I would have done the same.” I would have followed her to the end of the world. I hadn’t wanted to marry, but Aria had changed everything. She was my wife, and I would never let her go.

He nodded.

“I will make a few arrangements to have guns delivered to you in Amsterdam. I’ll check if I can find Rolfo so he can call his family in the Netherlands. You should pack what you need. You should be at the airport in two hours.”

“You should tell Rolfo to get a fucking mobile. The guy is still stuck in the 1970s.”

“He is almost seventy. I doubt anything in this world could convince him to use a mobile. I’ll drive to the Roma. He’ll be having dinner there. I’ll be back before you have to leave.” With that, I headed inside. In passing I told Romero, “I’ll be gone for a couple of hours. Make sure Aria stays in the apartment.”

“Will do, Boss,” he said as I stepped into the elevator. Romero wouldn’t let anyone drug him.

ARIA

I was tired, and I missed Luca. After my quick shower, I had crawled into bed. I was still sore but I didn’t mind. I only wanted things between Luca and me to return to how they were before today. It wasn’t even that late yet, only around seven o’clock, but the day’s events had been draining. I sat up when the bedroom door creaked open. The movement was too cautious, too quiet to be Luca. I slid out of bed when Matteo slipped into the bedroom, then turned to me.

My spine stiffened. “What are you doing here? And where’s Romero?” I moved around the bed but stopped halfway between it and the door.

Matteo’s lips pulled into a dangerous smile. “He’s outside, taking Luca’s call.”

For a moment neither of us moved. I wasn’t sure what to do. I didn’t want to call out for Romero’s help—yet. For one, I wasn’t sure if he could hear me out on the roof terrace, and I didn’t want to overreact. If I called Romero now, he’d have to tell Luca about this, and then things between him

and Matteo would turn sour. I didn’t want that to happen because of me. I’d messed up enough already.

He advanced on me and I staggered back. “Why are you here?” I asked with forced calm, but I couldn’t suppress the small tremor in my voice.

The coldness in Matteo’s eyes tightened my stomach with icy fear. “Getting the information Luca is incapable of obtaining. We both know you planned everything with Gianna.” He stalked closer and I whirled around. This wasn’t Luca. This was Matteo, and he was a man out for blood. A man who was used to getting what he wanted, and Gianna was the one thing he wanted more than anything. I rushed toward the bedside table, reaching for the drawer with the gun. I wasn’t even sure what to do with it. I could hardly shoot Matteo, or shoot at him. My fingers brushed the handle when Matteo’s hands clamped down on my hips. I was suspended in the air for a second before I landed on my back on the mattress, the air leaving my lungs in a whoosh. And then he was over me, and I froze. I had never been in bed with someone other than Luca. I began shaking.

Matteo’s eyes were calculating as he pinned my wrists at my sides, his body straddling my legs. “Perhaps pain isn’t the thing you fear the most,” he said in a low voice. He was appraising me like a means to an end. Matteo harbored the same monster as Luca, but his wasn’t contained in my presence.

I wasn’t sure what I feared the most right now. Matteo was very high up, but there was also the fear of what this meant for his relationship with Luca. I doubted Luca would forgive Matteo for this; he’d kill him, and that in turn would kill Luca. “Let me go before you do something you’ll regret,” I muttered with false bravado. Goose bumps erupted all over my skin. Matteo’s eyes took my reaction in. His calculating quiet freaked me out.

He still hadn’t done anything. He was conflicted. I could see it in his face. I needed to use that opening. Matteo liked me, perhaps not enough to stop him, but he loved Luca, and Luca loved me. “I have only ever been with Luca. This is the first time I’m in bed with someone else, Matteo,” I whispered.

Matteo released my wrists. “You are Luca’s,” he said quietly. “I would never dishonor you like that. Not even when it’s obvious how easily I’d get the answers I want if I did. This isn’t Vegas and I’m not that kind of man.”

Still towering over me, he reached behind his back, and pulled out one of his knives. This wasn’t Luca. Matteo didn’t love me. And I’d heard the stories. I knew what he could do, what he enjoyed doing. Like Luca, he knew no mercy, but with Matteo there was no love protecting me.

“I won’t tell you where she is,” I lied, because it could only be a lie. I wasn’t that strong.

“You will,” he said. The blade gleamed in the dim light streaming in through the windows. “Nobody can hold on to their secrets when I deal with them.”

“If I scream Romero will be here in a heartbeat. He will protect me.”

“He will try. And who says I’ll give you the chance to scream?”

He lifted the hem of my camisole and I began squirming, not used to someone else’s closeness like that. I stilled when the tip of the blade touched my skin below my belly button. “This is a very sensitive area. Many nerve endings. Even a small cut will be very painful.”

“Matteo, please,” I whispered. S*cream*, an insistent voice in my head said, but I needed to give it another try, for Luca.

He raised his eyes from the blade to my face.

“I know you are angry that Gianna ran. You are angry at me for helping her. I know you would do anything to get her back, but Luca won’t forgive

you for this.”

“He will kill me, as he should,” Matteo murmured.

Matteo and I stared at each other for a while because we both knew it was the truth. Slowly Matteo lifted the blade but he didn’t put it away. It was still there, still between us, still too close to my flesh.

“He trusts you,” I said.

Matteo glanced down at the way he was still straddling me. My fear was beginning to fade, knowing my words had gotten through to him. I could have cried from relief.

Matteo’s mouth thinned. “This is betrayal. You are his. I shouldn’t be here.”

He got off me, and I quickly sat up and scooted to the back of the bed. Matteo watched me, a flicker of regret passing over his face before it disappeared.

“We are monsters, Aria. Luca and I both. We have always been. We will always be. Don’t make the mistake of forgetting that. Everyone thought he was going to break you, that you’d kill yourself within weeks of your marriage. But here you are. That Luca treats you the way he does is a gift you should cherish and not trample on.”

He turned to leave.

“I won’t tell him about this,” I rushed to say before he could open the door.

Matteo looked at me over his shoulder, dark brows pulling together. “You should tell him. What I did was wrong.”

“Yes, it was, but no, I won’t tell him,” I said, determined. “I don’t want him to lose you.” And we both knew that it would happen. Luca would try to kill Matteo for today, and even if he wouldn’t go through with it, they’d

never be like they had been. Luca needed Matteo. I wouldn't take that from him.

Matteo inclined his head. "I swear I'll never threaten you again." He didn't wait for my reply; instead he slipped out and closed the door without a sound.

I released a breath and put a hand over my pounding heart. My hands were shaking. Good God.

I was still rattled from my encounter with Matteo when Luca returned later in the night. I'd stayed up reading to distract myself from everything that had happened, but my mind had kept straying back. His eyes were still tight with anger and disappointment over what I'd done when he undressed and came toward the bed. "Matteo is on his way to Amsterdam now. He might be gone for weeks or even months until he catches your sister," he said in a tense voice.

My fingers on my book tightened at the mention of Matteo. "Did you see him before he went to the airport?"

"No, he was already gone when I returned."

I bit my lip, tempted to apologize to Luca, but I knew I'd have done it again—helped Gianna, that is—and he knew it too. Luca slipped under the covers, his gray eyes hard as they searched my face. I put down the book, and my fingers still shook slightly. They hadn't stopped since my encounter with Matteo.

Luca took my hand. Of course he'd noticed. His eyes softened as he brought my fingers to his lips and kissed them. "I shouldn't have gone so hard on you today, but you pushed me into a fucking corner, Aria."

“I know,” I said quietly. “But I never meant to betray you. I love you, Luca.”

He leaned over, his hand cupped my neck and he pulled me toward him for a kiss. His tongue slid into my mouth as his other hand moved under my camisole, fingertips ghosting up my ribs until they found my nipple, which hardened under his touch. He pulled back. “I have to make it up to you for coming before you,” he rumbled, and I felt a trickle between my legs at the low timbre of his voice and the hunger in his eyes.

He helped me out of my camisole, then slid down my panties as his eyes left a possessive trail along my body. He lay back, gripped my hips and lifted me on his stomach.

“Ride my face, *principessa*. I want to taste you.”

My body flooded with need as I crawled up until I was positioned over his face. His hands came down on my hips and he held me in place, stopping me from lowering myself on his mouth like my body wanted to do. His eyes trained on my face, his tongue ran along my folds, slowly, barely touching, not enough. He retreated, smiling. “So wet for me.” I tipped my head down to meet his gaze. I loved to watch him as he loved to watch me. There was nothing hotter. He dipped the tip of his tongue between my folds and I jerked in his grip, but he still didn’t allow me to lower my body.

“Luca,” I gasped.

Again a long, slow lick up to my clit, followed by a small nudge of the tip. A low moan escaped my lips, but I needed more.

“Patience,” Luca rasped against my heated flesh, then kept up his teasing strokes. I gripped the headboard and surrendered to his sweet torture. With every stroke of his tongue, I grew more aroused, and Luca smirked as he slid his tongue along my opening, letting out a low humming

sound as he tasted me. And then finally, mercifully, his grip on my hips loosened. I sank down, pressing myself against his mouth. His lips closed over my clit and he sucked. I cried out and almost came but held back, wanting to prolong this feeling. His fingers kneaded my butt as I moved against him. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to hold back. I was getting there too quickly. My fingers tightened, my back straightened, and then my body exploded with my orgasm. I arched backwards and Luca kept me in place, against his mouth. I rocked forward, gasping, jerking.

I watched through hooded eyes as his tongue guided me through my orgasm with slow licks. His eyes were filled with his own need, his hunger for me and a hint of anger. He drew back, then licked over his upper lip. "Nothing better than your juices in my mouth," he murmured, and I shivered with the remnants of my orgasm. "Another round," he said before his mouth pressed up again and he continued his ministrations. I was still sensitive, but beneath it another orgasm was slowly building. I rested my head against the headboard and allowed myself a few more moments to enjoy Luca's gentle mouth. His fingers returned to my waist, and he hoisted me back until I straddled his stomach before he knifed up and sat back against the headboard. I didn't need encouragement. I positioned myself over his straining cock until the tip brushed my opening, then I took him in inch by inch until he filled me completely. We both moaned as our bodies connected. I leaned forward, my lips finding Luca's mouth, tasting myself on him. I twisted my hips as our tongues slid against each other leisurely.

Pleasure was building inside my core. I moved faster, deeper, grinding and rotating, and Luca's hips jerked up, meeting my thrust with his own. My eyes closed as he plunged himself deeper into me with every thrust. "So fucking gorgeous," he growled as he pumped into me, and the corners of

my mouth turned up, my eyelids fluttering open. I pressed my palms against his muscled chest, one hand over his Famiglia tattoo, *over his heart*.

"I'll go wherever you go no matter how dark the path," I whispered.

His grip on my hips tightened, tendons in his throat pulling tight. He was close. His hand ran down over my stomach, found my clit and pressed, and I came again, his own climax following a second later. I watched as his eyes closed, his lips parted. I loved the sight of him finding release. His arms wound around me and he crushed me to his chest, our bodies slick with sweat. I pressed my nose into the crook of his neck, breathing in his musky scent, hoping we were okay. His fingers trailed down my spine, then up again, and ended up playing with my hair as he so often did. Matteo had been right. I needed to cherish Luca's love, his tenderness, his trust. It wasn't something he gave freely, or at all, and for me he always had plenty.

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chapter 8

LUCA

Today Aria and I had our first anniversary, but instead of spending it on our yacht in the Mediterranean, I was stuck in a meeting in New York, trying to be Capo and Consigliere in one person, which wasn't working. I barely had time for her anymore. If she'd tell me where Gianna was, we could cut this ordeal short and Matteo could finally return, but Aria kept her silence.

"It's ridiculous," Uncle Gottardo said. "Matteo should be here helping you and not chasing his whore around Europe."

"I can handle business on my own, don't worry," I said sharply.

My eyes moved on to Cassio, who represented his father while the man was in the hospital. "How are you faring with the Bratva? Did they give you trouble again?"

There had been a major Bratva attack on our drug depot in Philadelphia one month ago. "Not since I killed Sergej and his brother Jegor, but we have an MC that's trying to sell guns in our territory."

Cassio handled things in Philadelphia with a brutal hand like I did in New York. It was time for him to take over as Underboss officially, but I wanted to wait until Matteo returned before I announced the change. Of course, I had no way of telling when Matteo would ever return. Gianna had managed to evade him until now.

I nodded. We had trouble with a new MC in New Jersey as well, but so far they were too unimportant to warrant an attack.

“The Bratva won’t risk an attack in New York any time soon. I killed too many of their soldiers, but I think they might focus on Atlanta or Charleston next.”

My Underbosses nodded. I gestured at Uncle Ermano, who ruled over Atlanta, and he began his report. I settled back in the chair, knowing this would be a long evening.

I managed to be back home around eight, and only because I’d cut another one of Uncle Gottardo’s rants short. Romero greeted me with a nod then disappeared as I headed outside where Aria was stretched out on the sofa. The moment I spotted her, my annoyance disappeared. I couldn’t stay mad at her even if she was the source of my problems.

She got up immediately and came toward me, guilt filling her face. “I got sushi for us. It’s in the fridge. I thought we could soak in the Jacuzzi a bit. You need to relax.”

I nodded and kissed her, feeling fucking exhausted. Aria hurried back inside and I began undressing then slid into the hot water, groaning as my tense muscles loosened. Aria’s soft steps made me open my eyes. She carried a tray with a bottle of champagne, two glasses and a selection of sushi, which she set down on the edge of the Jacuzzi. I watched as she got out of her dress, and despite my tiredness my cock reacted to the sight of her naked body like it always did. She slid into the water then pressed close to me, and I wrapped an arm around her. She kissed my throat before she raised her eyes to meet mine, looking insecure.

“We are okay,” I told her and ran my thumb over her arm.

She nodded toward the champagne. I reached for the bottle and opened it, even if I didn’t feel like celebrating. I was fucking happy about my

marriage with Aria, but today had been a long, shitty day and I wanted it to be over, anniversary or not.

Aria and I drank champagne then she reached for the chopsticks, picked up my favorite eel inside-out-roll and held it out to me. I took it, savoring the taste, and felt another bit of tension lift. When we were done eating, Aria straddled my lap and began massaging my shoulders. I leaned back, eyes closing.

Aria leaned close to my ear. “Why don’t we head up to our bedroom so I can give your back a thorough massage?”

“That sounds like a perfect plan,” I said in a low voice. Aria straightened, water dripping down that perfect body, and I rose to my feet and climbed out before I helped Aria out of the Jacuzzi as well.

After we’d dried off, we moved into our bedroom and Aria motioned for me to lie down on my stomach. I didn’t need to be told twice. She climbed on top of me and settled on my backside, her soft pussy pressed against my skin. Her fingertips traced the tattoo on my shoulder. “Have you ever regretted getting it?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“No,” I said without hesitation.

Aria shifted and pressed a kiss to the tattoo before her hands began their work, massaging the tension out of my shoulders and neck. “That feels so fucking good,” I rasped. I hadn’t even realized how tense I was.

Aria applied just the right amount of pressure on my back and I could feel myself relax further, my limbs becoming heavy.

I woke to Aria’s soft body curled against me, and sunlight tickling my face. My eyes shot open and I groaned. “Fuck.”

Aria’s eyelids fluttered, then she peered at me with those gorgeous baby blues. “What’s wrong?” Her voice was still raw from sleep.

“I fell asleep,” I muttered. “Not only did you have to spend most of our anniversary with Romero, but I didn’t even fuck you like I wanted to.”

Her lips twitched. “I think,” she began, propping herself up on my chest, “that it was a fitting ending to our first year of marriage. After all, you didn’t get any action on our wedding night, so it’s only fair I didn’t get any on our first anniversary.”

I chuckled. Trust Aria to make me feel better. Light in the dark, indeed. My fingers trailed down her spine over her ass and then between her legs, finding her wet. “Maybe we can start our second year with mind-blowing sex to set the mood for the future.”

Aria smiled then moaned as my fingers brushed up against her clit. “That sounds perfect.”

ARIA

Things between Luca and me were back to how they used to be. Sometimes when Matteo sent him an update of his hunt, Luca got tense around me, but it only ever lasted a couple of hours. I wasn’t sure if he knew that I could follow Gianna’s progress through the travel blog she’d established. Perhaps he suspected I knew something, but he’d stopped pressing for information.

I breathed in deeply, loving the crisp morning air. Central Park was quiet this early on a Sunday, except for joggers that made their rounds despite December’s cold. In summer Luca and I had been among them, but

in winter I preferred to do my run on the treadmill, though we still got up early to enjoy a morning walk.

Luca squeezed my gloved hand, and my eyes found his. “Dollar for your thoughts,” he murmured.

I smiled and drew to a stop. “Just thinking how much I love that we’re both morning people and that we get to have Central Park almost to ourselves.” Luca was almost always working these days. Without Matteo at his side, he had to take care of business on his own. I only had him during the early morning hours and late at night, but only in the morning did we really find time to talk. The nights were reserved for lovemaking, as Luca was too stressed from the day’s events to give me more than physical closeness. It was my fault, of course. Matteo was still gone because I didn’t tell them where Gianna was.

Luca chuckled, the low sound making me want to find a place where we could be alone. “To think that I used to party until the early morning hours, and now I’m up that early.”

My smile faltered. “Do you mind? You used to be the most sought-after bachelor in the city, and now…” I trailed off.

Luca pulled me close, and bent low so his warm breath ghosted over my face. “I was out all night, always hunting, always moving because there was nothing at home calling me back. Now there’s you and no matter where I am or what I’m doing, the thought of you waiting for me is the best.”

My body filled with warmth at his words, but a slight worry gnawed at me. “What about other women?” I whispered. “You had a new girl in your bed every weekend, and now there’s only me.” I’d seen how some of the female joggers had looked at Luca. I noticed how many of the younger and even older women at social events eyed him, how they undressed him with

their eyes. His predator charms lured them in. He was all muscle, all man, all power.

Luca shook his head. “Why would I want anyone else, Aria? There’s no one else I want.”

I curled my fingers over his neck and pulled him to me, my lips brushing his. “I love you, Luca.” His gray eyes softened, and that sight always got me. That look, that side of him, nobody got to see it but me. Perhaps Luca had been the first and only man to claim my body, but I was the first and only person who had that part of him, his soft side, his gentle side. That was all mine.

A buzzing noise drew us apart.

Luca let out a sigh. “Who’s it now?”

Luca reached for his cell in his coat, then glanced down at the screen, and from the look on his face I knew at once it was important.

I froze. “Luca?”

He looked up. “Matteo texted.”

My heart clenched. I swallowed. “And?”

“He got her.”

My breath left my mouth in a puff of fog. “Gianna?” As if there could be someone else.

Luca nodded. I could tell he was relieved, but didn’t show it openly because of me. Relieved because Matteo would finally return to New York after six months of being on the hunt for my sister. Six months. That’s how long Gianna had lived her dream.

I had risked a lot for Gianna: Luca’s trust, my marriage.

But it had been in vain. Matteo had captured her. I should have been miserable but I wasn’t. I was relieved, like Luca, because Gianna would be coming to New York. I’d finally see her. It was a selfish thought because I

knew she didn’t want to. She wanted to live a life away from the mob. She and I had always been very different when it came to dealing with the darkness of mob life. She’d wanted out, and I had wanted to find a place inside that life where I felt safe and comfortable. I had found it, and I hoped Gianna would find her own place too. Then worry overcame my thoughts. “What happens to her now? Where are they? Is she all right?”

Luca brought his hand up against my cold cheek. His palm was warm, even in the freezing temperatures. “Aria, your sister will be fine. Let me give Matteo a call.”

I nodded. I would have loved to snatch the mobile from Luca and call Matteo myself, but since our last encounter I wasn’t sure if it would have been right to do it. I had been glad for the months he’d been gone, though at the same time I wished Luca didn’t have to handle everything on his own. I wasn’t sure if I could ever act normal around Matteo again, but I had to try or Luca would get suspicious.

Luca dialed Matteo’s number, then waited, but nothing happened, and a new wave of worry overcame me. “Why isn’t he picking up? He won’t hurt Gianna, right? She didn’t do anything wrong. She just wanted to be free. He will bring her to New York, won’t he? He can’t take her to my father. Luca, please—”

Luca wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me against him, one of his hands cradling my neck. “For some inexplicable reason, Matteo wants your sister. He will bring her to New York, trust me.”

I trusted Luca. It was Matteo whom I didn’t trust. Even more so since he’d attacked me, but Luca didn’t know that, of course, and never would. “But will he hurt her?”

Luca didn’t say anything, and my heart plummeted. “Come on, let’s get back home. I have a feeling we’ll have to fly to Chicago soon to appease

your fucking father." He took my hand and led me toward the exit of the park. He hadn't answered my question because he couldn't.

I couldn't stop fretting over what was happening with Gianna, and Luca sensed it. He tried calling Matteo several times during our ride home, but he didn't pick up. When Luca's phone rang, I could have cried from relief, but it turned out to be my father.

Luca's face darkened as he listened to him. "We will come to Chicago to discuss matters with you. This isn't only an Outfit matter. Gianna is Matteo's fiancée." Pause. "Yes, still, until he decides he doesn't want her."

The moment Luca hung up, I asked, "What did he say?"

"Apparently, Matteo found your sister with another guy. I don't have to tell you how fucking bad that is."

I turned toward the car window, trying to keep it together. Matteo would see it as cheating and worse, as an attack on his honor. I knew how men in our world dealt with that kind of thing. Trembling, I turned back to face Luca and touched his hand. "Please, Luca, you have to make sure Matteo doesn't hurt Gianna."

We pulled into the parking garage and Luca shook his head. "She is his fiancée. I can't tell Matteo what to do with his woman."

I narrowed my eyes. He knew I hated that, but his expression spoke a clear language: I had to accept it. These were the rules of mob life.

I followed Luca out of the car, and his strong arm around my waist steadied me. "Don't worry so much."

How could I not worry?

Then finally when we arrived in our apartment, Matteo answered his phone.

"A text with 'I got her,' that's all I get from you?" Luca ranted. I pressed close to him, wanting to hear what Matteo had to say, but Luca was

too tall and Matteo didn’t speak loud enough for me to hear anything.

“What is he saying?” I asked, panic swinging in my voice.

Luca rolled his eyes at something Matteo said, then muttered, “With what?” He paused. “No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to fucking know.”

“Did he hurt her?” I practically shouted, hoping Matteo would hear me. My throat was tight and my eyes watered. I was going to lose it soon. Luca could tell as his gray eyes leveled on mine.

Luca lowered his voice. “Is she alive?”

I jerked against him, my eyes growing wide. I hadn’t considered that option. Matteo wouldn’t do it, right?

He was a killer and had found Gianna with another man.

Oh God.

Luca squeezed my hand. “I take that as a yes.”

“How’s Gianna? Please, is she all right? I need to know.”

Luca nodded. “Gianna is fine,” he told me, then to Matteo, “When will you be back?”

“Will he bring Gianna to New York?” I asked. Luca gently pried my hand off his arm and motioned for me to stay where I was. Then he walked out onto the roof terrace. I followed but stayed inside, watching him through the windows. I knew I was driving him crazy with my anxiety, but he had never liked Gianna very much. He tolerated her because of me, but he wouldn’t shed a tear if she were gone.

He paced the roof terrace, dark brows pulled together, disapproving. He shook his head, then lowered his mobile and spotted me watching him. He came back in.

“Your sister is all right, Aria. Matteo will be heading to Chicago with her to deal with your father.”

“We will go too, right?” I whispered.

He released a small sigh, then cupped my face. “We will. Of course, we will. We’ll take our plane. Go pack a bag in case we have to spend a couple of days in Chicago.” I nodded and was about to pull back, but he held me in place and bent down until his lips almost touched mine. “You need to stop protecting your sister. She’s a grown-up and she will have to deal with the consequences of her decisions. I don’t want to have to worry about you in addition to Matteo, *love*.” My heart fluttered at the endearment. Luca wasn’t big on nicknames, but whenever he called me “love” or “*principessa,*” it felt all the more special.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I promised. “As long as you are at my side, I can deal.”

“I’ll always be at your side, Aria—that I can promise you.”

He kissed me slow and sweet, before he allowed me to head upstairs.

Luca’s hand around mine was tight as we waited at the airport for Matteo and Gianna to disembark from their plane. The moment they did, I tugged at Luca’s hand and he released me. I ran toward Gianna. She was forced to walk beside Matteo, who kept her at his side, but then finally she was allowed to storm toward me and we collided painfully. I wrapped my arms tightly around her, glad to have her back in one piece.

“Oh Gianna, I was so scared for you. I’m so glad you’re here.” I couldn’t stop the tears.

I pulled back to give her a once-over. It took a second glance to recognize her with her dyed hair. Brown. I didn’t like it. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

Gianna stroked my hair. A rare gesture for her, and it ignited my worry anew. “Gianna? Did Matteo do something?”

“Matteo didn’t do anything,” Matteo said in a hard voice. I jumped, my eyes darting to him. When his dark eyes met mine, I fought the urge to look away as fear bubbled up in me. I thought we’d settled things between us, but my body seemed to disagree. Matteo’s brows pulled together as he regarded me and I averted my eyes. I didn’t need Luca to pick up on the tense atmosphere between his brother and me.

“I didn’t ask you,” I said quietly. When Luca arrived at my side and clapped Matteo’s shoulder, I relaxed. “Good to see you again,” he said, and I could tell he meant it. He’d missed Matteo, his only confidante except for me.

“I’m fine,” Gianna assured me when I returned my worried gaze to her.

“The Boss is waiting,” Stan, an Outfit solider, barked. “Let’s go. It’s not like the whore deserves a big welcome.”

I gasped. I couldn’t believe he’d actually dared to insult Gianna like that. Matteo pulled a knife and hurtled it at Stan, who cried out when the blade nicked his ear. He pressed his hand against the injury, his other hand on the gun at his waist.

“Next time my blade will split your fucking skull if you don’t keep your mouth shut,” Matteo hissed.

“We don’t want this to end badly, do we?” Luca asked in a very low voice, both of his guns pointed at the two Outfit soldiers. “Your boss wouldn’t appreciate it.” Romero, too, was aiming at them. They nodded their reluctant agreement.

Luca put his guns back into their holsters. “Let’s go.”

The other soldier picked up the knife Matteo had thrown and handed it back to Matteo, who didn’t take his eyes off Stan.

“She’ll ride in a car with us,” Stan said.

Matteo’s lips pulled into a cold smile. “This is the last warning you get. Stop pissing me off or I’ll carve a smile into your throat.”

The second soldier grabbed Stan’s arm and pulled him toward a black Outfit car while the rest of us headed toward two BMWs.

I held Gianna’s hand tightly, happy to have her back. I’d missed her voice, even her colorful language. Gianna slipped into the backseat and I was about to follow when Luca gripped my arm. “No. I want Matteo to keep an eye on your sister.”

Gianna rolled her eyes. I squeezed her hand once, then released her and got into the passenger seat beside Luca, who would be driving. I hoped things would fall back into place now, but I knew all of us had a long road ahead of us.

LUCA

Aria was glowing with happiness over having her sister back, and Matteo looked like he was going to have a fucking boner from a look at Gianna.

“You’d probably jump out of the moving car if I gave you the chance,” he told his fiancée.

“I’m not completely crazy. Do you think I’d risk running around Chicago unprotected when my father’s men are obviously out to hurt me?” Gianna bitched back.

She was a pain in the ass, and I wasn’t happy about having to deal with fucking Scuderi because of her.

“So you trust me to protect you but still don’t want to marry me,” Matteo said.

Gianna sucked in a breath. “You still want to go through with the marriage?”

“You could probably ram a knife into his back and he’d still want to go through with it. He’s a stubborn fucker,” I said. Aria put a hand down on my thigh, a small smile playing around her lips. That sight softened my annoyance toward Matteo and Gianna.

“I didn’t hunt you for six months only to let you go.”

After he’d found her screwing around with another guy, I’d have thought he’d lose interest in her, but not Matteo. The mere idea that someone else could touch Aria, see her perfect skin, fuck her, drove me up the wall. Matteo was far more forgiving than me. I’d have skinned the bastard who touched what was mine. I wasn’t sure what I’d do to Aria if she cheated on me, if she betrayed me like that. My pulse raced at the mere idea. I loved her more than anything else, but I didn’t think I could control myself if she was disloyal to me.

Aria’s blonde brows drew together. She squeezed my thigh in silent question. She knew me too well. I gave her a small smile, and she relaxed. My own pulse slowed. There was no sense in losing my shit over something that was never going to happen. Aria was only mine.

Matteo had really gone through with marrying Gianna. Of course Scuderi had gladly handed her over. She was ruined in our circles. Word about her fucking around would be the hottest gossip in New York and Chicago soon. Nobody would have wanted her, nobody of worth at least. If Matteo hadn’t agreed to marry her, Scuderi would have to give her to a low soldier or worse. She was lucky my brother’s obsession with her was still going

strong. I hoped he wouldn’t come to regret his decision after he’d fucked her and satisfied whatever itch he had.

But more than that, I fucking hoped he’d figure out a way to keep her under control. Things in New York would be tense now that Gianna was his wife. I could only imagine what my uncles and aunts and the rest of the fucking family would say to his decision, and worse: to my decision. I had allowed him to marry a ruined woman, after all.

Fuck him. He was practically fucking Gianna with his eyes. He hadn’t stopped leering since we’d boarded the plane in Chicago after the wedding, and he was still at it now that we’d arrived in New York. Of course Aria, too, had noticed, and tension radiated off of her in waves as we stepped into the elevator of our apartment building. She was worried for her sister, always worried. I tugged at her hand to draw her attention away from my brother and her sister, but she didn’t seem to notice.

The elevator stopped with a bing and the sleek doors glided open. Matteo practically dragged Gianna into his apartment. I really hoped he’d get a handle on his anger because I’d be the one left to deal with the mess, and my worry-struck wife.

Aria took a step forward as if to follow them. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her back against me. “What are you doing?” I murmured as the elevator doors closed before us. Aria tilted her head up, her face pale with concern.

“He looks like he’s out for blood. I don’t think he’ll take no for an answer.”

The elevator sprang back into motion. “Of course, he won’t, Aria. After what your sister did, she can be glad he didn’t kill her. He was supposed to have her on their wedding night, and she ran off and let other men have what’s his.” That he still wanted her was so fucking typical for Matteo.

Aria shivered. “She didn’t do anything horrible. She tried to live her life. Nothing else. It doesn’t give him or anyone the right to treat her like a whore they can have in whatever way they like,” she said firmly.

Sometimes I forgot how good and innocent Aria still was. It turned me on like nothing else. The elevator halted on our floor and I led her into our penthouse, very intent on distracting her from her worry.

“You know how hotheaded Matteo can be. I—”

I lifted her in my arms and pressed my lips against her open mouth, stopping her from saying more. She gasped in surprise then pulled back, frowning. “Luca,” she said indignantly. “I’m being serious.” I carried her up the stairs and into our bedroom.

“I know,” I murmured as I lowered her on our bed. I hovered over her and she shook her head.

“You are being impossible,” she said, her breathing hitching as I ran my hands up her lean legs, then hooked my fingers in her panties and dragged them down.

“I don’t like it if you don’t take me seriously,” she said quietly as I lifted her skirt and parted her legs, laying her perfect pussy bare to me.

She was aroused, but her voice held a hint of strain so I climbed back up and stretched out beside her, kissing her slowly before I said, “I’m taking you seriously, Aria, but you are worrying about something I have no way of changing. I can’t tell Matteo what to do. I’m his Capo, yes, but Gianna is his wife and I can’t interfere. That’s one of the rules I’m bound to, and you know it.”

Her blue eyes filled with realization.

“Stop thinking about it. Your sister can hold her own.” I wasn’t sure that was true. If Matteo really lost his shit on her, that wouldn’t go over well. From what I knew, his tastes didn’t veer toward the rough side of things in

the sexual department, but driven by jealousy and fury as he was, things might get out of hand.

I ran my hand down her side and slid it below her shirt, my fingers brushing over her stomach and then I kissed her again, and this time she opened up, her tongue meeting mine. I got her out of her skirt to have full access to her and moved my hand between her legs. My fingers found her clit then dipped lower. Aria was still worried. She wasn't as ready as usual, but I knew how to change that. I eased one finger into her, her walls clamping tightly around me, and my thumb pressed up against her clit. As I established a slow rhythm, I intensified our kiss, tasting her perfect mouth, and she parted her legs wider for me, a soft moan escaping her throat. Her face flushed with arousal, her eyes half-lidded, and my finger moved more easily out of her slick channel.

I added a second finger and she kissed me even harder, her hips moving in rhythm with my fingers. I pulled back from her eager mouth. "I love fingering you. So hot and tight and wet." I kissed her. "Do you like my fingers in you? Fingerfucking your perfect pussy?" I thrust my fingers deeper, curling them to reach that spot.

Aria shuddered out a moan. "Yes," she gasped as I repeated the motion. My dick was so fucking hard watching her. "I want you inside me, Luca."

My cock twitched, too willing to comply. "Later," I got out. I sat up so I could watch my fingers slipping in and out between those perfect pink folds. Fuck. I moved my second hand under her shirt, finding her perky nipple and pinching it through her lacy bra. Aria cried out, eyes closing, as her hips arched off the bed. Her walls squeezed me tightly, but I kept fucking her with my fingers as she trembled and moaned. A few golden strands stuck to her sweaty face. So fucking beautiful. And all mine. I was a fucking possessive asshole.

I slowed my fingers as her breathing calmed. She licked her lips then turned those gorgeous blue eyes to me. I smirked and pulled my fingers out of her. She let out a soft moan, lips parted, and I slid my fingers coated with her juices into her mouth. She swirled her tongue around them, her eyes challenging me, and I groaned. My cock gave a fucking twitch. I was going to combust any second.

Aria gripped my wrist and pulled my fingers out from between her lips, smiling coyly. “Out of your pants,” she said.

I chuckled at her commanding tone and pushed off the bed before I turned to her and unbuckled my belt, unzipped my pants and pulled them and my briefs down. My dick sprang free, already leaking pre-cum like I was a fucking randy teenager. That woman turned me on like nothing else. She crawled to the edge of the bed, smiling wickedly. I didn’t waste any time and stepped closer until my shins bumped against the mattress.

Her fingers curled around the base of my cock, and then she parted those pink lips and took my tip into her hot mouth. My hand flew up to her neck, tangling in her long hair. Aria eased more of my length into her mouth as she worked my shaft with her hand. I rocked my hips, needing her to go faster, but she didn’t let me take the lead. Whenever I pushed deeper or faster, she eased back, driving me fucking insane. Her eyes shone with mischief and triumph as they held me in their spell.

“Aria,” I growled, my fingers on her neck tightening, but she ignored my warning tone. She swirled her tongue around my tip, then she released me and moved back. “What are—” I stopped.

She turned around on all fours, presenting her butt to me. She smiled at me over her shoulder and wiggled her hips. I didn’t need more encouragement. My hands clamped down on her waist, and I lined myself up against her opening before I eased into her. I closed my eyes from the

delicious pressure and her warmth, and stayed buried inside her for a couple of heartbeats before I withdrew almost all the way only to thrust back into her.

She moaned and I thrust into her harder, my legs slapping against her firm butt. Slowly she lowered herself until her arms were stretched out above her head and her cheek was pressed up to the pillow, allowing my cock to go even deeper. I slowed my first few thrusts in that new angle, knowing her body always needed a moment to yield to me in that position and not wanting to cause her discomfort. When she began meeting my thrusts, I sped up again, pounding her deep and hard, loving her moans and gasps whenever I hit her sweet spot.

“Touch yourself,” I ordered when I could feel myself getting closer. Aria slipped one arm under her body, and her fingers grazed my balls as she started rubbing her clit. Her moans spiraled out of control, and my own release was fast approaching. My balls tightened as I slammed into her and Aria arched up, her walls clamping down on my cock as she cried out her release. I let loose, and came hard as I kept thrusting.

Eventually, I stilled, my cock growing soft and my breathing slowing, as I ran my hands up Aria’s back. She released a small sigh, softening under my caress. I bent forward and kissed her cheek. She tilted her head to meet my kiss with her soft lips. I pulled out of her and she moaned again.

I chuckled at how sensitive and responsive Aria was. In the beginning of our relationship I’d worried we wouldn’t work well in bed together. She’d been shy and fearful, and our first few times had been fucking uncomfortable for her, but now she knew what she wanted and what I wanted, and it was fucking perfect.

ARIA

Afterwards, as we lay curled against each other in our bed, I asked, “Would you have noticed if I hadn’t told you I was a virgin?”

Luca gave me a strange look. “It would have been hard not to notice.”

“Perhaps I could have hidden it.”

Luca kissed my throat, chuckling. “No. Believe me.” He pulled back, gray eyes searching my face. “Why are you even asking such a question?”

I hesitated. Gianna didn’t want anyone to know, and if I told Luca about it, he might let it slip. Gianna would be furious if Matteo found out because of me, even if I still doubted she could hide it from him, and Luca had only confirmed my suspicion.

Luca let out a laugh, and I knew he’d figured it out himself. He knew me too well, and he was too good at reading people. “Gianna?”

I looked away, trying to think of a way to get Luca off the trail.

His head got closer, corners of his mouth tipping up in a grin. “Don’t tell me she didn’t get laid while she was running around.”

I tucked up against his side and frowned. “Gianna isn’t as bad as you make her out to be, regardless of her temperament.”

Luca’s body vibrated against me as he succumbed to actual laughter. That low, deep laugh always sent tingles down my spine, and few people ever got to hear it.

His eyes half-closed with obvious amusement, he asked, “Are you serious? She’s still a virgin?”

“Yes,” I said, but as my eyes found the alarm clock on the nightstand, revealing that two hours had passed since I’d last seen her, I amended, “She was. I don’t know the current state of things.”

Luca laughed again. I really wasn't sure what he found so amusing. "Matteo is going to be in for a surprise. Oh hell. I'd love to see his face when he finds out."

I swatted his chest. "Be serious. I'm worried he's going to hurt her."

"Of course, he will. He's been waiting to fuck her for months and he's going to have her tonight. If she doesn't tell him he's her first, he'll take her like he would any other woman."

Luca was doing a bad job trying to ease my worries. I really hoped Gianna had changed her mind and told Matteo that she hadn't done what he and everyone else thought she had.

"What was the purpose of running and ruining her reputation if she didn't even have fun? Trust your sister to fuck it all up."

I'd asked myself the same question. Gianna had been so eager to run away, to make her own decisions, to escape from the shackles of an arranged marriage, but in the end she'd hardly gotten anything out of it. Perhaps she should have tried to come to terms with her marriage to Matteo from the start. I was wary of Matteo, but I knew he would have tried everything to win her over. Now I wasn't so sure anymore. "If I'd done what Gianna did, what would you have done?"

Luca's expression darkened but he was careful not to let me see the full force of his emotions, so I knew it was bad. He pushed the strap of my nightgown off my right shoulder. "You didn't," he said as he planted a kiss on the top of my shoulder. "I'm glad you've always only been mine. Every little inch of you has always been mine alone, and that won't ever change."

I rolled my eyes at his possessiveness. It thrilled and annoyed me equally. With him being Capo, possessiveness was to be expected. He ruled over the East Coast, over hundreds of men, practically owned them and his territory; of course he wanted to own me as well, wanted to control me. It

wasn’t always easy to make him see me as an equal, to have him rely on me, and not expect unquestioning obedience. It was a struggle I still hadn’t won completely, but we were on a good path.

What annoyed me more than his possessiveness was him not giving me an answer to my question. His tongue slid over my shoulder, then up to my collarbone. It made it hard to concentrate, but I was determined not to let him distract me like that again.

“Stop worrying about your sister. She can handle herself. And Matteo knows how to make a woman come.”

He wasn’t taking this seriously, nor me either. I sat up, leaving Luca no choice but to stop his kisses, and hoping the higher vantage point would give me an advantage. Luca rolled on his back, relaxed, as his arm eased around my waist. I knew his mood would change soon. “I don’t want to stay at home anymore. I want to do something. I want to be useful.”

Luca’s dark eyebrows climbed his forehead. “You are useful to me.”

“How?” I challenged.

Luca smirked, and that was the last straw. I escaped his grip and slid off the bed. “Regardless of what you think,” I muttered as I reached for my bathrobe, “my sole purpose in life is not to be pretty and warm your bed.”

Luca was quick to react, swinging his legs out of bed, sitting up and snaking his arm around my waist to pull me back against him. I tried to resist but he was way too strong. I let him pull me flush against his body so I was peering down at his tense face, but my body didn’t soften in his embrace. I needed him to see how important this was to me. Since Gianna had run I had done a lot of thinking. I knew I’d grow depressed if I stayed holed up in the penthouse.

“Aria, you are my wife. When you married me, you knew your options would be limited. This life will always be a golden cage. You need to be

protected from the Bratva and other threats."

"If I went to college, that wouldn't pose an additional risk, Luca. It's not like the Bratva is going to attack campus. What you mean is that you prefer to have me where I'm not surrounded by other people, especially men."

Luca's lips thinned, his arm muscles twitching. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "I don't trust men around you. Every guy with eyes in his head is going to want a piece of you. You are fucking gorgeous."

His compliment did nothing to appease me. I'd heard those words all my life, from everyone around me. My beauty was all I'd ever been known for. It was why I had been given to Luca in marriage. "I'm surrounded by Romero and Sandro and other men all the time."

"They are my men, and they know the consequences of touching what's mine," he growled, eyes filled with the promise of violence. "They would never dare to even leer at you, but outsiders aren't bound by our rules. I would kill them for touching you like I would my men, but that would only be after the deed was done because they don't know who you are. They might risk touching you."

"You know what's funny?" I said, my hands coming up against his chest to push away, but again he didn't give in. "You never once considered my reaction to their advances. I don't care if a Made Man or an outsider makes a move on me, because my reaction would be the same. I would refuse them and tell them that I'm married, because I'm faithful. You're in contact with women all the time and I don't run around worried that you'll be touched by them, even though I have more reason to be distrustful considering what happened with Grace."

He became rigid. "It's not fair to hold that against me, Aria," he murmured. "I made a mistake. Back then our marriage existed only on

paper, and I never even thought about anyone but you after that. I'm faithful. No other women will ever change that."

I sighed. I shouldn't have brought Grace up. She brought back memories I didn't want to relive and like Luca said, she was a thing of the past. Luca had never given me reason to doubt his faithfulness again. "Why can't you trust me around other men?"

"I trust you, but I don't trust them, and while I am capable of refusing advances, you are a small female who wouldn't stand a chance against a male opponent."

"We've been working on my self-defense skills. I'm getting better," I said, but really, it was still a long shot before I'd be able to fight off an attacker half Luca's size. Besides, in the last six months we'd hardly found the time to train at all, because Luca had been busy taking over Matteo's work as well. "And not all men are ignorant to the meaning of 'no.'"

"One asshole is enough," Luca said.

"Romero could be at my side, as he is when I go jogging or shopping."

Luca searched my eyes. "What would you want to study anyway?"

"I thought about it for a while. It needs to be something useful for the Famiglia. I can't really work in the outside world. The only way for me to have a job is if I could be part of our business, and that limits my choices. I doubt you'd be happy if I became a chemist and produced our drugs."

Luca's mouth loosened, and his embrace became less of a cage. "That would be interesting, no doubt."

"I thought perhaps I could get a bachelor's in accounting. That way I can do our books."

Luca nodded slowly. "An accountant—that's something even the old-fashioned family members might be able to accept."

"Does that mean I am allowed to go to college?"

Luca sighed. “If it makes you happy, you can get a degree, but Romero will have to be at your side at all times, and I don’t want word to get around that you are attending college. You know how wary my family still is regarding my capability to be Capo. My uncle Gottardo thinks he should be doing the job, and my aunts would love to see their husbands or sons in my position. I can’t kill them all, not without being provoked. That wouldn’t bring me my men’s respect, so I will have to keep them silent as best as possible.”

“We don’t have to tell anyone about me getting a degree. Romero won’t tell anyone. I won’t even have to tell Gianna right away if you worry she might let something slip.”

Luca stroked my hair from my face. “That’s probably for the best. Your sister is a ticking time bomb at the moment. Let’s only keep Romero in the loop.”

“So you’ll really allow me to do it? When can I start?”

“Whenever you want.”

“The application deadline for NYU’s business program is January 1st. I could try to get my application in by then. I’m not sure if I’ll get everything I need, though, but I could try…” I trailed off.

Luca pulled me down so I straddled his lap. “If you want to get into NYU, you will get in, Aria.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in his shoulder. I’d have thought he’d fight me more about this. Getting a business degree and becoming an accountant for the Famiglia wasn’t my dream job. If I’d been raised in a different family, I might have chosen to become a teacher or social worker. I wasn’t sure, but I knew a business degree would be most useful in my position. When I pulled back, I caught the hint of concern on Luca’s face before he masked it and I promised myself I’d show him that

me doing something outside the penthouse, me getting a degree, wasn't a risk for our marriage or his position as Capo.

"With your hair and given our presence in the newspaper, people might recognize you," Luca said.

"And that would draw unnecessary attention," I concluded. "How about I wear a wig? It worked for Gianna."

Luca frowned. "You and her together are a dangerous combination."

I leaned closer and pressed a kiss to his tense mouth. "Don't worry. This time you'll know everything. So what do you think? A wig. Perhaps you'll like me better with brown hair."

"No," he said, twisting a strand of my hair around his long, strong fingers. "Your hair is perfect. Like spun gold, nothing can come close to it."

I laughed. His fascination with my hair was almost cute. I'd lost count of the times he'd played with it.

"A wig might work. Luckily, Romero is good at staying in the background and he hasn't been in the public eye."

"It's still months before I could even attend college. We'll figure out everything then. If they accept me."

"They will," Luca said without a doubt. I knew my grades had always been top-notch, but I had a feeling he would have his ways to get me accepted even if they weren't.

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chapter 9

LUCA

“I have a bad feeling about today,” I said as I steered our car toward the Bardonis’ town house. Bardoni had been close with my father, one of the reasons why Matteo and I couldn’t stand the asshole. He was my Captain, not a good one, and his son was a fucking coward.

“Because of Gianna and Matteo?” Aria asked with a small frown. “I know you’re worried because he took off her ankle monitor but she won’t try anything today.”

I wasn’t worried about that. Since Matteo had caught Gianna a couple of weeks ago, they had either been fucking or fighting. And things had been fucking tense in the Famiglia because my uncles weren’t the only ones who thought making Gianna part of the Famiglia was a bad idea. I shared their opinion but couldn’t say so outright, not only because it would make me look weak to doubt my decision, but also because of Matteo and Aria.

“Bardoni thinks his son should be Consigliere and because of Matteo’s decision to marry Gianna, some forces in the Famiglia agree.”

Aria bit her lip. “I hate that you are having so many problems because of Gianna’s flight.”

“I will silence my doubters eventually, but it’s a pain in the ass,” I said. Another bloody statement was inevitable at some point.

Aria huffed out a laugh when we pulled up in the Bardonis’ driveway. “What is that?”

I followed her gaze toward a massive angel carved out of ice that had been set up in the front yard. The entire yard sparkled in white and gold. “Bardoni likes to impress,” I muttered.

Aria raised one pale eyebrow, and I squeezed her hand briefly before I got out of the car and dropped the pleasant expression.

I opened Aria’s door for her when Matteo pulled up with his Porsche behind my Aston Martin.

Aria sighed as she regarded me.

“What?” I asked quietly.

“Sometimes your expression scares me. I prefer the way you look behind closed doors.”

I touched her back. “I know.”

My eyes settled on Bardoni and his wife. Both were beaming at us, fucking fake smiles on their faces. I nudged Aria lightly and she followed me toward my Captain. He shook my hand before he took Aria’s and kissed it. He helped her out of her coat, his eyes darting toward her chest for the briefest moment. I leveled my gaze on him and he quickly stepped back, and turned his attention toward Matteo and Gianna.

“Come on,” I said to Aria, touching the exposed skin of her back, and led her into the living room. My eyes did a quick scan of the guests—the majority were soldiers from New York but I recognized a few men from Philadelphia, among them Cassio. As I made my way toward him with Aria at my side, I said under my breath, “That’s Cassio Moretti.”

“Son of Mansueto Moretti, Underboss of Philadelphia,” Aria finished with a smile. “I remember him from our wedding, Luca. I have a good memory. I know most of the men in this room, and the women too.”

I nodded. Sometimes I forgot how clever Aria was, but I had seen her grades when I’d prepared everything for her application to NYU.

Cassio straightened when he spotted me and I extended my hand for him to shake. Then his eyes moved on to Aria, respectfully. “It’s an honor meeting you again.”

“The honor is all mine, Cassio,” she said with a sophisticated smile, looking up at my soldier. “How’s your wife doing? I heard she gave birth to your first child a few days ago.”

I had forgotten about that. I gave Aria’s hand a light squeeze to show her my appreciation.

“She’s recovering,” Cassio said, then his eyes moved back to me and I could tell he had business to discuss.

Aria smiled, catching the silent message. “I’ll go talk to Mrs. Bardoni for a while.” She turned around and left, giving me a stunning view of her naked back.

Cassio cleared his throat, his eyes on me, and I finally tore my own gaze away from Aria. “My father’s health isn’t improving. He can’t take care of business anymore.”

“I will announce you as Underboss of Philadelphia in our next meeting.”

Surprise crossed Cassio’s face. “I thought perhaps you wanted to give the position to one of your cousins to…”

“To what?” I asked in a sharp voice.

He met my gaze. “To appease your family.”

I smiled darkly. “My family will bow down to my command if they know what’s good for them. You are loyal, and I prefer to reward loyalty than favor someone because of their blood.”

Suddenly Gianna appeared at my side and gripped my forearm. I leveled my gaze on her, caught off guard by her closeness.

“Luca, can you please come with me for a moment?” she asked in the most civil voice she’d ever directed at me. My body went into high alert at once.

“Excuse me,” I told Cassio, who nodded and stepped back.

Gianna didn’t loosen her grip as she led me out of the living room.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked suspiciously. I didn’t trust the redhead one bit.

“Matteo needs your help,” she whispered, her eyes darting to a door down the corridor.

“Fuck,” I breathed. “Get back to the party and find Aria and Romero before people get suspicious about us being gone together.”

She pursed her lips. “As if I would ever have a quickie with you.”

“Don’t worry, the idea of fucking you excites me just as much.”

I turned my back on her and headed for the door she’d indicated.

“Matteo?” I growled, already losing my fucking patience though I didn’t even know what had happened. Knowing Gianna and Matteo, it couldn’t be anything good.

Matteo opened the door and waved me in.

“What do you want? Gianna didn’t say anything,” I began when I spotted Bardoni behind his desk with Matteo’s knife buried in the underside of his chin. “Oh fuck.”

Matteo shrugged. “Bardoni had an accident.”

I couldn’t fucking believe his nerve. He’d killed one of my Captains in his home, as if I needed more problems than I already had. “Fuck, Matteo, what did you do?”

“If you ask me, I think good old Mr. Bardoni killed himself,” he said.

I walked around the body. Few people killed themselves by shoving a knife up their throat. “It’s because of Gianna, isn’t it? Bardoni did or said

something that annoyed you and you lost your shit. I knew the girl would bring nothing but trouble."

And that was the understatement of a lifetime. Damn it.

"The asshole has been on your death list for a while. He's been stirring up shit. You are glad he's gone—admit it. We've discussed having him killed countless times. I decided to finally act."

"Of course I wanted him dead, but not in his own fucking home at his Christmas party. Damn it, Matteo. Can't you think first and shoot second for once?"

I could tell that he wanted to make a joke, probably about having stabbed Bardoni and not shot him, but I narrowed my eyes and he shut up. "I'll call Romero. He's keeping an eye on Aria and Gianna, but we'll need him here to deal with this fucking mess."

I called Romero. He picked up after the first ring. "In how much trouble are we?"

Trust Romero to know shit had happened. "Come to Bardoni's office *asap*."

When Romero joined us a few minutes later and took in the scene, he looked at Matteo. "You killed him?"

"Why did it have to be me?" Matteo asked.

"Because you're the crazy one," I muttered. His sanity hadn't improved since his wedding to Gianna. I turned to Romero. "Can you make this look as if Bardoni killed himself?"

Romero grimaced. "Few people stab themselves in the brain."

"There's always a first time for everything," Matteo said with a fucking grin. I glared at him.

"Oh, come on. It was funny."

I had to stifle a laugh. Matteo was a crazy fucker. “Search the room for a gun that could have blown his fucking head off. I don’t need the Bardonis on my back right now. I want this matter dealt with quietly,” I ordered.

“No matter how we make it look, the Bardonis will suspect something. They won’t believe it was suicide. Bardoni was far too narcissistic to end his own life,” Matteo said.

“Maybe I should put a fucking ankle monitor on you, too,” I growled. “You are a ticking time bomb.” I’d been the one who had suggested he put that thing on Gianna, but apparently he needed more supervision as well.

Romero stopped searching the drawers of the desk. “Even if the Bardonis suspect something, they won’t say it aloud. If they don’t have proof, they won’t seek retribution.”

Matteo shook his head. “I wouldn’t count on it. But we’ll make sure they won’t get a chance for revenge.”

Matteo’s knife was still wedged in Bardoni’s fucking head. If someone entered the room now, we’d have to turn this Christmas party into a bloodbath. “Maybe you should pull your knife out of Bardoni’s head. Nobody will believe it was suicide with your blade stuck in his chin.”

Matteo carefully removed the knife and jumped back before blood could get on his clothes.

Romero pulled a high-caliber Smith & Wesson from a drawer in the cupboard behind the desk. “This could do.”

I nodded. Romero was my best soldier hands down. I knew why I’d chosen him to protect Aria, which reminded me that she was currently unguarded. “Good. Matteo and I will return to the party. Wait about five minutes before you blow his head off, then get the fuck out of here. Matteo and I will hopefully be here first, and in the commotion nobody will notice you are gone.”

Romero was already busy figuring out the best angle to shoot Bardoni and barely reacted when we slipped out of the room and closed the door. The annoying redhead stood at the end of the corridor.

“Make sure she doesn’t let something slip,” I muttered. “And we’ll have a talk about this fucking matter later.”

“Don’t worry. Gianna can lie if she has to.”

My eyes moved to Gianna. “Oh, I don’t doubt she can lie very well if she wants to. But she’s not exactly the most trustworthy person.”

“She’s my wife,” Matteo growled.

“That’s the problem,” I said as I walked away. Aria was clutching a wineglass in her hands, eyes filling with relief when she spotted me. She excused herself from a conversation with a young woman I couldn’t place and came toward me. I gripped her arm and she shot me a questioning look.

I couldn’t tell her what was going on with so many people around us. I led her toward the buffet table, making sure enough people saw us. “Luca,” she said quietly, body tense.

I gave a small shake of my head, and just then a loud shot rang out. Playing my part, I pulled my Beretta and whirled toward the direction of the noise. Aria’s body jerked against mine, fear flashing across her face. I leaned down to her ear. “Stay here. It’s nothing, trust me.”

I rushed toward Bardoni’s office with the other men, shoving some of them away to be at the front. Matteo, too, came running. “What’s going on?” he shouted.

Bardoni’s wife let out a high-pitched wail when she spotted her dead husband. It was a horrible attempt at acting.

When I returned to Aria later and met her worried gaze, I swore to myself that I would never have Aria see me like that, because I knew her agony would be real. I was leading a life full of death, and I didn’t exactly

fear dying, but since Aria came into my life I had another reason to stay alive.

Things went smoother than I'd hoped after the Bardoni incident. Bardoni's wife and daughter didn't seem to miss him, and his son was a sniveling coward who would never act on his own.

Of course, Bardoni's Christmas party wasn't the last time Matteo fucked up.

Business associates had invited us to their Christmas party five days before Christmas in a warehouse, which had been turned into a winter wonderland with fake snow and a bar carved out of ice. Matteo had been in a terrible mood all evening, because of Gianna, naturally. She refused to fall for his charm.

Aria sent me a placating look. "Let's enjoy the rest of the evening."

Now that I'd sent Matteo and Gianna away, that was maybe an option.

"Will you dance with me?" Aria asked, her expression hopeful and soft. If we hadn't been surrounded by so many people, I would have kissed her, but as it was I gave a nod and pulled her against me. She released a small sigh as we began moving to the music.

"Will your sister ever come to terms with being married to my brother?" I asked quietly.

Aria raised her eyes. "I don't know. I think she really likes him but she doesn't want to admit it."

"Why? Does she enjoy making everyone miserable so much?"

Aria pursed her lips, her steps faltering, but I steadied her. "That's not it. She feels guilty for liking a man like Matteo."

My lips twisted. “A man like Matteo?”

“Gianna thinks she will have blood on her hands if she accepts Matteo’s dark side. She feels guilty. She wants to be a good person.”

“What about you?” I murmured.

Aria’s brows drew together. Her hand traveled up my back until her palm pressed against the tattoo on my shoulder. “You know that I accept every part of you.”

“I know,” I said, lowering my voice even more. “But do you feel guilty because of it?”

“Guilty for loving you? No, never,” she said firmly, not a hint of doubt in her voice, and my chest swelled with love for the woman in my arms. “If that makes me a bad person, I don’t care.”

“You are good, Aria. Nothing about you is bad,” I whispered fiercely.

She rewarded me with one of those smiles, and I had trouble keeping my hard mask. “I think you may be biased.”

“I’m not. It takes a lot of goodness to cancel out my darkness.”

She huffed but I didn’t get the chance to say more because my phone started ringing. “Fuck,” I muttered. Aria and I moved off the dance floor and I checked the screen. “Matteo,” I said, annoyed. Aria followed me toward a calm corner of the warehouse.

I took the call, feeling my blood boil. “I’m not in the mood to talk to you, Matteo. You acted like a major asshole tonight.”

A female sob sounded on the other end. I tensed and Aria moved closer.

“Gianna?” I asked carefully as I headed toward the door and walked outside. Aria had trouble keeping up with my pace. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“He’s dying,” Gianna said.

I stopped in my tracks. “What are you talking about? Give me Matteo.” My breath left my mouth in clouds from the blistering cold, and Aria shivered beside me.

“I can’t. The Russians attacked us. There’s so much blood, Luca, so much blood.”

My throat constricted. “Is Matteo alive?”

Aria gasped and pressed up to me. “Luca?” I shook my head, and her eyes filled with tears. “Call Romero and tell him to bring Sandro.”

Aria took out her mobile, following my orders.

“He’s not breathing. He was a moment ago, but he’s not anymore,” Gianna whispered.

If he’d still been breathing not too long ago, he could survive. Matteo was a fighter. Aria nodded at me and lowered her phone.

“Gianna, you have to do CPR. I’ll be there soon. I have your GPS coordinates. But you’ll have to get him breathing or it’ll be too late.” I motioned for Aria to follow me as I jogged toward my car. She was fast on my heels and we both got into my Aston Martin.

“Give me your phone. I need to track Matteo’s cell,” I told her, still pressing my own mobile against my ear, but Gianna had been silent on the other end for a while.

“Gianna?” I said as I revved the engine. Static crackled in my ear and for a heart-stopping moment, I thought Gianna had hung up. This was her fucking chance to escape once and for all. If Matteo died, she’d be free. But if she let him die to be free, even my love for Aria wouldn’t stop me from hunting her down.

“I know you feel like Matteo trapped you, that he ruined your life, but no matter what you think, he didn’t do it to make you miserable. For some unexplainable reason Matteo loves you. You don’t have to believe me. You

can keep hating him but don't leave him alone, not now. If you help me save his life, I'll grant you freedom. I swear it on my honor and my life. Aria is here. She's my witness. You will get money, a new identity and even protection from the Outfit if you want. It's all yours, if you save his life."

Aria's lips parted in shock, eyes wide and incredulous but I kept my eyes on the street, following the directions of Aria's phone.

"Okay," came Gianna's reply.

That fucking bitch. I stifled my fury and focused on saving my brother's life. "You have to do chest compressions. Hard and fast. Don't worry about breaking his ribs. Thirty pushes, two breaths. *Fast*."

I could feel Aria's eyes on me the entire time.

"He's not reacting!" Gianna shouted.

"Keep doing it," I ordered. There was silence on the other end, and my throat got even tighter. Aria touched my leg but didn't say anything.

"We'll be there in ten minutes," I got out past the lump in my throat. "How's Matteo?"

More silence, and I stiffened. "Gianna? Are you still there?"

"Yes. Matteo is breathing again."

Relief surged through me and Aria squeezed my thigh tightly. She let out a shuddering breath. "Good. Stay where you are," I said quietly. My eyes were drawn to the rearview mirror where I could see Romero's car approaching.

"Don't worry," Gianna said.

The moment we arrived, I saw Matteo's smashed car. I hit the brakes, shoved open the door and ran toward Matteo. I fell to my knees beside him and did a quick scan of his injuries. His head was covered in blood, but like Gianna had said he was breathing. Romero and Sandro joined me.

“Called the Doc,” Romero informed me as he sank down on the ground beside me. Aria was talking to Gianna, who still hovered beside Matteo as if she actually gave a damn if he lived or died. Since we’d been little Matteo and I had protected each other; it had been us against the rest of the world—against a sadistic father, against a mother who let her despair out on us, against the enemies that wanted to see us dead.

I looked up from my brother to Gianna. Just seeing her face made me want to kill her. To think that I had to convince her to save Matteo’s life… “Get her away. Take my car and drive her to our apartment.”

“Where are you taking Matteo?” she dared to ask.

“To the hospital. This is too serious for our Doc,” I said, trying to keep it together in front of Aria, but I gave Gianna my coldest smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll honor my promise. When I return to the apartment, we’ll make the necessary arrangements to ensure your freedom.”

“Maybe Gianna wants to go to the hospital with Matteo,” Aria suggested softly as Sandro and I lifted Matteo off the ground.

“She doesn’t. Help her gather her things from Matteo’s apartment, so we can get her settled in her new life before my brother returns home.” I didn’t want her anywhere near my brother ever again.

ARIA

I grabbed a few clothes out of Matteo’s wardrobe even if it felt strange to rummage in his underwear, and stuffed them into the small bag with a couple pairs of sweatpants and shirts as well as socks.

After that, I went into his bathroom and grabbed his toothbrush. My eyes lingered on Gianna’s hairbrush that she hadn’t taken with her. Sandro

had driven her to a hotel. She had taken Luca up on his deal. I couldn't believe her decision was final. I'd seen how she'd looked at Matteo when she thought no one was paying attention. Sighing, I turned and headed back to the elevator.

Even if she changed her mind, I didn't think Luca would ever forgive her. He was convinced she would have let Matteo die if he hadn't made his offer. I'd rarely seen as much hate in his eyes as when he'd looked at Gianna yesterday.

The elevator took me back up to our penthouse. Luca perched on a barstool, a coffee on the counter in front of him and his eyes trained on his phone. He looked up when I entered but the tension didn't leave his face. I walked over to him, dropped the bag beside the bar and stepped between his legs. He put the cell down and cupped my face. "Where is he?"

"In the big guest bedroom," he said, looking exhausted, shadows under his eyes.

"Soon he'll be back to annoying you," I assured him.

Luca smiled wryly. "He was already a pain in the ass when I picked him up from the hospital today."

I searched his eyes. "I've never seen you as worried as you were yesterday."

His fingers trailed down my throat then pushed my collar off my shoulder, revealing the small scar there. "You didn't see my face when you got shot."

"You didn't lose me back then, and you didn't lose Matteo."

Luca stroked my scar then his gray eyes met mine, full of emotion. "You took a bullet to save my life, while your sister would have let my brother die for her own fucking freedom."

I didn’t try to defend Gianna, even though I knew deep down that he was wrong. Luca leaned forward and kissed my scar, then my throat until his mouth claimed my lips. His phone rang and he pulled back with a sigh, glancing down at the screen. It was Sandro. He picked up and listened for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” He hung up, sighing. “I need to go to a meeting with my Captains. We’re going to plan our retribution.”

Surprise washed over me. He usually held back with information like that, and it showed me how rattled he still was because of Matteo.

“I will keep an eye on him,” I said with a reassuring smile.

Luca frowned. “Romero and Sandro are both out. I will tell Romero to come back as soon as possible, but it might be an hour. I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone.”

“I won’t be alone. Matteo is here.”

“Matteo is injured and probably passed out again.”

“Luca,” I said firmly, touching his chest. “Nobody can get inside the penthouse without a code, and Matteo is still deadly when he’s injured. I’ll be fine until Romero returns.”

Luca stood and pulled one of his guns from his holster, then handed it to me. “Just in case.”

I didn’t point out that I didn’t have much practice shooting a gun. He kissed me, before he walked toward the elevator, already lifting his mobile to his ear.

The moment he was gone, I stuffed the gun into the back of my pants, then picked up the bag with Matteo’s clothes and headed toward the guest bedroom. I hesitated. Matteo and I hadn’t been alone since he’d attacked me seven months ago. Pushing back the memories, I turned the handle and slipped in quietly. My eyes landed on the bed where Matteo was stretched

out, his back to me. He was covered by the blankets, only his disheveled and still matted hair peeking out.

Relieved that he was asleep, I headed toward the wardrobe on the other side of the bed to put away his clothes. I opened the door.

“I don’t think you need that gun. I’m a fucking mess anyway,” Matteo said.

I cried out, dropped the bag and whirled around, my back colliding with the wardrobe as my eyes flew to the bed. Matteo sat up, brown eyes attentive despite their swelling. He regarded me silently.

He was dressed only in sweatpants, and his upper body was covered in bruises and cuts. He looked a mess but I didn’t relax. I straightened despite my racing pulse.

He sighed. “You can stop being scared of me, Aria. I told you I’d never threaten you again, much less hurt you, and I meant it.”

I wasn’t scared. I was wary. “I got some clothes for you.”

He nodded then grimaced. “You don’t need to unpack. I won’t stay here forever. You can leave now.”

I dropped the bag and headed for the door but stopped when I saw Matteo pushing to his feet. “What are you doing?”

“Going to take a piss,” he muttered, taking a step toward the bathroom and swaying precariously.

I rushed toward him and wrapped an arm around his middle without a second thought. He leaned heavily on me for a moment before he caught himself and tried to straighten, but I didn’t let go of him. I wasn’t sure if his tension was because he didn’t want to show weakness in front of me, or because he worried his closeness would make me nervous.

His eyes met mine as I supported his weight as well as I could. “Just drop me on the bed. I’ll piss my pants,” he muttered with a twisted grin.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous, Matteo. I will help you into the bathroom.”

He didn’t protest, and together we managed to reach the bathroom. He was heavy and tall, and I realized with Luca this would have never worked.

We stopped right beside the toilet. “Are you able to do this?”

Matteo chuckled. “What would you do if I told you no? You can hardly hold my cock.”

I blushed and released him carefully. “Well, you could sit down for once, or will that bruise your ego?” I raised my eyebrows at him.

He smirked. With his swollen eyes, bruised body and face, and matted hair, it didn’t have the desired effect. “Nothing can bruise my ego like Gianna’s hatred.” It was meant as a joke, but I caught the hint of bitterness in his voice.

I took a step back. “I’ll give you some privacy. Call if you need my help, okay?”

Matteo didn’t say anything, but he reached for his sweatpants and I took that as my cue to leave. I closed the door and hesitated a moment before I busied myself setting Matteo’s clothes out in the wardrobe. I gripped a shirt and a fresh pair of sweatpants, then put them down on the bed.

Deciding to find some food for Matteo, I went into the kitchen, picked up a ready-made pasta salad and prepared a strong black tea with lots of sugar before I returned to the guest room.

Matteo was still in the bathroom. Worry flooded me as I set down the tray and moved toward the bathroom door. The sound of the running shower made my eyes widen. In the state Matteo had been in, taking a shower seemed like a particularly bad idea.

“Matteo?” I called. Nothing. I reached for the handle then hesitated. Matteo was probably naked, and not only did that make me nervous, but I

knew how ridiculously possessive Luca was. I knocked hard. “Matteo?”

Deciding this couldn’t wait, I pushed open the door and stepped in. Matteo was kneeling in the shower, his back curved, palms braced against the floor. I saw his profile. Thankfully from my vantage point his privates were hidden from my view. He was covered in scars and fresh bruises and cuts and blood was streaming down his back, probably from his head wound.

I took a hesitant step forward. “Matteo?”

His shoulder blades and arms tensed. “Leave,” he growled.

“Can you stand?” He didn’t look like he could.

Matteo slanted me a look, brown eyes hard. “You shouldn’t be here. Luca won’t like it if you see me naked.”

I huffed. “He will like it even less if you kill yourself by accident.”

“I’ve survived worse.”

Ignoring his glare, I grabbed a towel and approached him, my eyes set on his face.

I had to lean over him to reach into the shower and close off the water. My breath caught in my throat at the icy temperature. Was he trying to give himself a heart attack? By the time I’d managed to shut off the water from my awkward position, the front of my clothes were drenched and I was shivering.

Matteo watched me intently from his crouch on the ground, and there was the hint of wariness in his expression. I paused. Like Luca, he hated showing weakness, and I wasn’t someone he trusted like Luca trusted me.

I grabbed the towel from where I’d dropped it on the ground and held it out to Matteo. “Can you cover yourself?”

He surprised me by not making a funny comment as he accepted the towel and wrapped it awkwardly around his waist.

“Can you get up?”

He let out a low sound in his throat, a mix of groan and laugh, and raised an eyebrow.

“That’s a no, I suppose,” I said.

“I’m too heavy for you, trust me. Give me a moment.”

I waited and watched as his back heaved with every breath. He braced his arm against the glass of the stall, muscles flexing, and managed to get one knee up. I reached for him but he shook his head. “No,” he said harshly, then softer, “No.”

I took a step back. His body shook as he propped his arm up on his knee and braced the other against the shower stall. With a low groan, he pushed to his feet, then staggered and fell against the shower stall. The thing vibrated as if it was going to burst. I jumped forward and wedged my shoulder against Matteo’s ribs while I gripped him around the middle.

He let out a quiet sigh. “You don’t have to help me. You owe me nothing.”

“I want to, and I owe you common decency,” I muttered, glaring up at him.

“I suppose it’s my special talent to make you Scuderi women hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, Matteo,” I said firmly. “And neither does Gianna.”

He raised his head so I could see his expression and nodded toward the door. “If we go slow, I should be able to support most of my weight.”

It took us several minutes to reach the bedroom when Matteo tensed suddenly.

“Someone entered the penthouse,” he murmured, every muscle in his body taut. I hadn’t heard a thing.

“Luca said Romero would come over.”

“I assume that means nobody’s on guard at the moment.”

I blinked up at him, suddenly worried. The Russians had managed to get into the mansion, so who said they couldn't get into our penthouse? His hand slid down my back and after a moment of shock, I realized what he was doing. He pulled the gun out of the waistband of my pants and aimed it toward the door, straightening from my shoulder.

"Get behind me."

"You can't stand on your own."

"Get the fuck behind me, Aria," Matteo snarled, and I recoiled but then narrowed my eyes.

"No."

Maybe he would have shoved me behind him, but in that moment Romero called out. "Aria? Where are you?"

His voice rang with concern.

"Here!" I shouted, and it took only a few seconds for Romero to burst into the room, gun in hand. When his eyes settled on Matteo and me, surprise crossed his face, and he put his gun back in his holster.

"Matteo thought it was a good idea to pass out in the shower," I said.

"I didn't pass out. I stumbled and fell," he muttered.

Romero came toward us and slid his arm under Matteo's armpit. I released a small breath when the heavy weight lifted off my shoulder and stepped back.

"I'm taking it from here. Why don't you go change?" Romero said.

I glanced down. My shirt was see-through from water and giving a view of my white lace bra, but there was also blood on the fabric.

Before I left the room, Matteo's voice rang out. "Aria?" I turned to him. Romero had hoisted him down on the bed. "Thank you."

I smiled. "You are welcome."

Feeling drained, I made my way upstairs into the master bedroom. I took a long hot shower before I slipped into my softest wool nightgown, and lay down in bed.

I was woken by a warm hand on my cheek. Luca's face hovered over me as his thumb stroked my skin. I blinked. "What time is it?"

"Late," he murmured.

"Oh," I said. "I must have fallen asleep. How's Matteo?"

"Better," Luca said in a strange voice. I searched his eyes. He was watching me with a look that filled my belly with butterflies. "He told me what happened."

"I had to help him," I said indignantly. "I don't care if you're mad that I almost saw all of him."

Luca let out the softest laugh and I frowned, confused by his mood. His hand slid down my side and he bunched up my nightgown and settled between my legs, his warm body covering mine. When his tip brushed my center, I released a surprised breath. He didn't enter me, only kissed me.

I kissed him back, softening under his heat and strength. Soon Luca's tongue in my mouth and his body on top of me had me slick with arousal, and he finally eased his tip into me. His eyes held mine as he slid the rest of the way in, and I moaned at the utter fullness.

"I don't deserve you, Aria."

He claimed my mouth again before I could protest and soon his expert movements had me writhing and panting, forgetting any word of objection.

LUCA

Four months later

Matteo was chasing Gianna toward the ocean, her high-pitched screaming ringing out. Aria wrapped her arms around my waist, giving me her “I-told-you-so” look. I didn’t think Gianna would return to my brother, but she had. They seemed happy enough. I still didn’t trust the redhead, not one bit, but I was glad for Matteo’s good mood.

“Let’s just hope she doesn’t change her mind.”

Aria shook her head. “You see, once you Vitiello men have wormed your way into our hearts, there’s no escaping.”

Her blue eyes sparkled with amusement.

“I never had the intention of worming my way into your heart,” I admitted because love had never been part of the bargain.

“I know,” she said with a shrug, then her smile turned playful, and my cock tightened. “You only wanted me for my mad sexual skills.”

I choked on a laugh. Aria gripped my hand and pulled me into the mansion.

Later that day, Matteo and I set up a barbecue on the patio. I turned the lamb chops while Matteo picked up a bottle from our wine cellar and Aria prepared a hopefully edible salad.

Gianna stepped up to the barbecue, and I raised my eyebrows. She looked like she had something to say, and usually that wasn’t something good.

“I know you don’t like me,” she said, actually looking nervous. Gianna, nervous? “But I think we should try to get along better, for Aria and Matteo.”

She met my gaze and held it. I still wasn't a Gianna fan, would probably never be, but she had a point. Aria and Matteo wanted us to get along. "I didn't like you because I hated how you treated Matteo."

She frowned as if this was a fucking surprise. "Okay."

"But I'm starting to change my mind," I said. It wasn't quite the truth, but not a lie either.

"You are?"

I turned a lamb chop, and shrugged. "I'm starting to think that maybe Matteo was right and you two aren't the worst match." They were both hotheaded and conflict-loving. They deserved each other.

"Thanks? You are really bad with compliments."

"I'm not in the habit of handing them out. And don't tell my brother I said he was right. He's cocky enough."

Matteo came our way, arms loaded with wine bottles. For an instant his expression tightened when he spotted Gianna beside me. He knew me well enough to figure I couldn't stand her most of the time, but he needn't have worried. That woman was safe because she was his no matter how infuriating she was.

"He is," Gianna said with affection. I forced my expression into something less cold, and Gianna gave me a grateful smile.

Matteo set the wine bottles down on the table before joining us and wrapping his arm around Gianna's waist. "What are you two gossiping about?"

"You."

"Is that so?" Matteo lifted one eyebrow.

Aria came back from the kitchen, carrying a bowl. She sent me a questioning look as she snuggled up to me. "What's going on?"

“Your husband and my wife are discussing my many wonderful traits,” Matteo said.

Gianna eye-fucked Matteo. “You are way too cocky.”

“Admit it, you love my cockiness.”

“Done.”

“Your declarations of love still make my knees go weak,” he joked.

“Your cockiness isn’t the only thing I love about you.”

It was only a matter of time before those two would disappear for another fucking session.

“I need some bloody lamb to cancel out this disgusting display of sweetness,” I muttered. Aria smiled up at me, and I squeezed her hip.

Matteo lifted Gianna up and did some fucking twirl.

“I’m not sure I can stand them together,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Aria grinned. “Admit it, you are happy.”

I hesitated. I was happy, happier than I had been all my life. I nodded toward the bowl Aria was still holding, trying to change the topic. “How did the salad turn out? Is there a chance of food poisoning?”

Aria gave me a knowing look.

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chapter 10

ARIA

I grabbed the wig and positioned it on my head. It took me a couple of minutes to make it look natural.

I had chosen a hairdo I'd never be allowed to have because Luca would never agree for me to cut or dye my hair. The wig was a dark brown bob that was longer in the front than in the back. After spending our second anniversary on our yacht in the Mediterranean, my skin was tanned enough that the dark hair color didn't look unnatural despite my blue eyes.

The wig changed my face completely, made me look more edgy, less sweet. I had chosen tight black jeans with a tight black-and-white striped shirt and white sneakers. I didn't look anything like myself. This was the look of a college student and not a mafia princess. I grinned, ridiculously happy.

I stepped out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, where Luca was pulling a black dress shirt over his chest.

Luca halted when he spotted me, his eyes wandering the length of me.

I twirled around. "And? What do you think?"

"That's not you," he said.

"I know." I grinned. "Nobody will recognize me like this."

"You look happy," Luca said quietly as he fastened his gun holster on his chest.

“I am,” I admitted. I’d finally go to college. I’d pretend I was a normal woman, not the wife of the Capo. It was strange that I was on my way to attend college while Luca would be heading out to deal with whatever problems the Famiglia was facing.

He was still tense, so I moved toward him and touched his chest. “Everything will be okay. Romero will be at my side.”

Luca nodded. “He will have to keep his distance now and then so he doesn’t attract attention. You are supposed to blend in.”

“I will,” I said.

Luca touched my wig, his lips twisting. “I miss your hair.”

“It’s only for college,” I assured him. “I’ve been thinking about how to make sure guys keep the distance you want them to.”

Luca’s eyes became attentive.

“Romero could pretend to be my boyfriend. He’s only two years older than me.”

Luca didn’t look convinced. “How would you pull that off?” Jealousy rang in his voice.

“We could hold hands. That would be enough because people will always see us together anyway.”

Luca nodded. “That could work. And I trust Romero with you. He will be respectful.”

I laughed. “He will refuse to hold hands, trust me.” I paused. “Don’t talk to him. I want to take him by surprise later.”

Luca smirked. “You are devious. Romero is loyal. He will lose his shit if you make a move on him.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll ask him to pretend, that’s all.” I tilted my head. “So it’s okay if I hold Romero’s hand, or if he wraps his arm around my

shoulder?” I wanted to make sure Luca could deal with it and wouldn’t make Romero’s life hell for it.

Luca kissed me possessively. “With anyone else, no, but Romero, yes. He knows you are mine.”

Everyone in our world knew I was Luca’s.

I couldn’t stop staring at Romero. He looked like a college student in his dark jeans and checkered shirt. The girls would be throwing themselves at him. He drove us in his own car, a dark gray Dodge Charger.

Romero glanced my way. “I will attend as many courses with you as I can. We will have lunch together, and you won’t walk anywhere without me.”

I sighed. “Yes, I know. We’re practically attached at the hips.”

He parked the car, then got out, but was too late to open my door for me. “Stop it,” I muttered. “Pretend you are my boyfriend and not my bodyguard.”

Romero’s eyes widened, and he gave a shake of his head and took a respectful step back.

I held out my hand. “I think it’s the best way to get men to back off, Romero. You are intimidating. Don’t be a coward,” I said teasingly, wiggling my fingers at him.

He eyed them as if they were poisonous snakes about to attack.

Deciding to cut this short, I moved toward him before he had a chance to back away, grabbed his hand and pulled him toward me. Caught by surprise, he rocked forward and steadied himself with a hand on my hip.

My God. The look on his face would bring me through many dark hours in the future. I laughed and he withdrew his hand as if he'd been burnt. "Aria," he murmured imploringly, tugging at my hand, but I didn't let go.

"Calm down, Romero. People will get suspicious if you refuse to hold your girlfriend's hand."

Anger filled his eyes, and I felt guilty for making him think he was doing something Luca wouldn't approve of. I released his hand.

I sighed. "I talked to Luca about this. He thinks it's a good idea if you pretend to be my boyfriend so other men back off."

Surprise banished the anger. "He said that?"

"Call him," I urged him, and of course he did. After getting Luca's okay, he relaxed visibly.

"I told you so," I muttered.

"Luca is my Capo," Romero said firmly. "I can't go against him, especially not when you are involved."

"I know," I said, growing frustrated. "I'm well aware that I am your Capo's possession."

"You aren't Luca's possession. You are *his*."

I wasn't quite sure if there was a difference, and it wasn't like it still bothered me much. After two years of marriage, I'd come to terms with Luca's possessiveness. Romero held out his hand with a small smile. "Come on, Aria."

I flashed him a grin, deciding not to let anything ruin this day for me, and slipped my hand in his, then we walked toward classes. Even without my blonde hair, several guys stared at me. I hadn't expected it.

Romero grew rigid. "If they knew who you were they wouldn't be leering."

“They don’t know, and that’s exactly what we want.” I peered up at them. “Your death glares will scare them off soon enough.”

He chuckled. “I have to do what Luca would do.”

My chest tightened. I sometimes wondered how it would be if Luca wasn’t who he was and if I wasn’t who I was. If we were normal people, if we could stroll these halls together like a normal couple. Tears prickled my eyes because that was never going to happen. Luca had never had the choice to go to college. From the day of his birth, his path had been determined, a path of darkness, full of enemies even among our own.

“Are you okay?” Romero asked, stopping a few steps from our class, letting go of my hand.

I shook my head. “I wish Luca could be here.”

“We are all bound to the path we were destined for.”

A group of boys my age walked past, and one of them turned and grinned at me. Surprise shot through me at his obvious flirting.

“Okay. I don’t like this,” Romero growled.

“Then show them that I’m your girlfriend. Trust me, they will back off if you give them that look. They are full of themselves, but anyone with eyes in their heads can tell that you aren’t a man to be messed with.”

Romero hesitated.

“How would you treat me if I were your girlfriend?”

He frowned.

“Without kissing,” I added quickly, flushing.

“Trust me, Aria, I would never dream of kissing you. You are like my little sister.”

I smiled, because Romero was like a big brother I’d never had.

He moved closer and circled my waist with his arm, his palm resting lightly on my hip. I tensed at the unfamiliar closeness.

Romero regarded me, murmuring, “Is this okay?”

“Yeah. I’m just not used to being this close with anyone but Luca,” I admitted, embarrassed.

He nodded. “I know. Are you ready to go in?”

I took a deep breath and together we strolled into my first class as a college student, and like I’d predicted the guys backed off the moment they saw me with Romero.

I was giddy when we were on our way back home. I couldn’t wait to tell Luca about my day. For the first time I had more to tell him than just about my shopping adventures or the book I’d been reading.

Romero’s phone rang and he picked up after a glance at the screen. “Luca,” he said.

I turned, curious.

Romero nodded. “Will do. Yes, everything went well.”

“What did he want?”

“He is still in the Sphere. He wants me to take you there because he wants to take you to our dojo for training when he’s done.”

My eyes widened. It had been a long time since Luca and I had practiced, but me going to college obviously made him reconsider. It was unusual that Luca had told Romero to take me to the Sphere. I pulled off my wig and smoothed down my hair. It was wilder than usual.

After picking up gym clothes, we headed for the Sphere and Romero parked the car right in front of the entrance. This time he was quick enough to open my door, and I gave him a look before I headed for the entrance. It was only late afternoon so the club wasn’t open yet, but Jorge guarded the

door nevertheless. His dark face registered surprise when he saw me, especially dressed in jeans and sneakers. That wasn't my usual outfit. He didn't comment though.

We entered the club, went past the cloakroom, then into the main area. Blue and white and black were the dominating colors. The bar counter looked like it had been carved from frozen water, a pale fluorescent blue. "That's new," I said, surprised.

"Luca had it renovated recently. To stay at the top, we need to keep our clubs up to date." My eyes were drawn toward the platforms with poles in the middle. "And pole dancers are a must for that?"

Romero shrugged. "They send the crowd into rapture."

Luca hadn't mentioned that he'd renovated his club. I wished he'd share more of his daily life with me. I'd have to talk to him about it, make him see that for us to be partners all the way he had to involve me more, and not shield me from everything Famiglia related. Perhaps him inviting me over was a start.

Romero led me to the back of the Sphere where several private rooms were located and then into a sort of office. I remembered it dimly from the roofie incident. Luca and Matteo both perched on the edge of the desk, deep in conversation. Luca looked my way when I stepped in, his eyes lingering on my hair, and a pleased look passed his face.

"Gianna has been asking about you," Matteo said by way of greeting. Guilt tightened my stomach over keeping my going to college a secret, but Luca had insisted we involve as few people as possible for as long as possible. She would find out soon, of course, because we usually spent every day together.

"He knows," Luca said.

“You realize the moment Gianna finds out you are attending college, she’s going to want that too,” Matteo muttered.

I gave a shrug. “Then let her.” Luca sent me a warning glare. I knew he still didn’t trust Gianna, but that was his problem.

“How did it go?” Luca asked as he walked toward me and pulled me against him for a possessive kiss. His eyes were drawn to Romero, not me.

“It went well,” I said. “Romero was the perfect boyfriend.”

Luca chuckled.

“Did Aria at least put out?” Matteo asked with a grin.

Romero laughed.

Luca smirked, then he lowered his dominant gaze to me. *Mine*, that’s what his eyes said.

Romero joined Luca and me in the gym, but a few other soldiers were there as well when we entered the old warehouse.

Before I joined Luca in the ring, Romero whispered. “Use your speed. Luca will never be able to move as fast as you with your small body.”

I sent him a smile before I climbed into the ring. Luca hadn’t bothered with a shirt this time and was only wearing fighting shorts. My eyes trailed over his six-pack, his pecs, his broad shoulders. Looking at him, I could think of many things I’d rather be doing than fight. Luca’s answering smirk made it clear he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Even my speed wasn’t enough to outsmart Luca. He seemed to guess my every move, and when I landed on my back for what felt like the hundredth time with him crouching over me, I let out an exasperated sigh. Luca’s eyes were dominant but soft as they looked down at me.

Then I heard one of the teenage boys, who had been doing bench presses, say something along the lines that he wouldn't mind fighting me either, and my body tensed at Luca's expression.

He pushed to his feet and pulled me with him.

It was like a switch had been turned as he faced the group of three boys. They were perhaps sixteen or seventeen, and their faces flashed with fear the moment they realized Luca had heard them.

I touched Luca's wrist lightly. "Luca, they are boys."

His eyes settled on the boys, ignoring me. "They are my soldiers."

Romero moved toward the ring and parted the ropes for me. "Come on, Aria." I let him help me out of the boxing ring.

Luca motioned for the boys to come closer. "Show me your tattoos," he ordered.

One after the other the boys pulled their shirts over their heads, revealing the Famiglia tattoo over their hearts. They were more muscled than I'd thought.

Luca pointed at the tallest, and the boy didn't hesitate to climb into the ring even though he looked like he was going to wet himself. He was tall but only reached Luca's nose.

"He isn't going to hurt them, right?" I asked Romero, who had his arms crossed over his muscled chest and was watching without mercy.

"They are his soldiers."

As if that answered my question. "They are boys."

"They stopped being boys when they were inducted into the Famiglia."

"You wanted to fight," Luca said coldly. "Now fight me, Demetrio."

The boy hesitated only a second before he attacked. Luca dodged the attack, gripped the boy and flung him into the ropes. Demetrio tried to catch his fall but Luca punched him in the ribs. The boy went to his knees with a

pained gasp, yet Luca knew no mercy. He gripped the boy by the throat and punched him in the stomach. Demetrio fell to his knees, wheezing. Luca got behind the boy and wrapped his arm around his throat with a look that sent a shiver down my back. I flinched when he tightened his grip until the boy's head turned red. Romero gripped my wrist because I had made a move to interfere. Was he going to kill the boy?

Luca stepped back, relaxing his hold and Demetrio fell forward, coughing. For several moments, he lay sprawled out on the floor of the ring, then Luca held out his hand and Demetrio took it. Luca jerked him to his feet and released him. The boy scrambled out of the ring. Luca pointed at the next boy. "Orfeo."

The boy hung his head and climbed into the ring. I turned around and walked back into the changing room. Luca had to make sure his soldiers respected him, but it was difficult to watch him being like that. These were boys. I wasn't naïve, I knew boys in our world were raised from a young age to be tough. They had to be to become Made Men, but I couldn't help but wonder if Luca would be the same way with a son. Father had always been hard on Fabi, and I doubted that had changed since I had moved to New York.

I took a quick shower, always uncomfortable in the changing room because I knew I was blocking it for everyone else as long as I was inside. I pulled my clothes on when the door opened. I didn't have to look up to know who it was. When I raised my eyes Luca stood across from me, his chest covered in sweat and blood, but his expression had lost the brutality. I stepped up on the wooden bench between us to bring us to eye level.

Luca's gaze flickered with questions. I traced my fingers from his temple down his cheek to his throat. One second monster, the next loving husband. I would never understand Luca.

He touched my waist. “They needed to be taught a lesson. They are young but it won’t stop them from getting killed.”

I didn’t say anything, and Luca’s brows drew together. “Aria?”

“I can’t stop wondering how you will treat a son one day.”

He became rigid. “I don’t want children.”

My eyes widened. We’d never talked about having kids. I’d just assumed we would have them eventually—after all, Luca needed to produce an heir.

He shook his head. “Right now,” he amended. “Or in the next ten years.”

Ten years? I’d be thirty then, still not old, but I’d thought we might start a family sooner than that. “Oh,” was all I managed.

Luca searched my eyes. “You want children before then?”

“Well, not right away, but perhaps in five years?”

He didn’t say anything, and I decided not to push the matter now. We could still bridge the subject when the time was right.

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chapter 11

Seven Months Later, LUCA

“The Outfit has upped their LSD and ecstasy production, and some of their shit makes its way over into our territory. I don’t think that’s by accident,” I muttered as I pointed at the email Durant had sent me. Pittsburgh made up the outer west of our territory, and he had reported the inconsistencies. Romero and Matteo nodded as they stared down at my laptop.

Aria’s phone rang, and I looked over to where she was hunched over her books in the corner of my office in the Sphere. She’d had to switch from going to college to online courses in accounting. Things were simply too tense with the Bratva and the fucking annoying MCs to risk it.

She picked up her mobile and I was about to return my attention to my laptop when her face turned white. I rose slowly.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can, Lily.”

Romero stiffened at my side at the mention of Aria’s sister, and I slanted him a sharp look before I moved toward Aria, who sat frozen on the sofa. I crouched in front of her and her tear-filled eyes met mine.

“Your mother?” I guessed. Ludevica Scuderi had been fighting a losing battle with cancer for months now.

“She’s dying. It won’t be long.” Aria swallowed, fighting for composure.

“We’ll be flying over immediately,” I said, then turned to Romero. “Get everything ready. I’ll need you to come with us. Someone has to guard Gianna while I keep an eye on Aria.”

Matteo cocked one dark eyebrow.

“You have to stay here to handle business, and we both know you’ll end up killing Scuderi if you meet him.”

“If he hurts Gianna…”

I held up a hand. “He won’t. I will make sure of it, don’t worry.”

Gianna and her father were at each other’s throats the moment they met. I could tell that Scuderi would have hit her if I wasn’t there. But even their constant fights didn’t worry me as much as the looks Romero gave Liliana whenever he thought nobody was paying attention. He was like her constant shadow throughout the days leading up to her mother’s death, and even at the funeral. If I hadn’t been busy consoling Aria, maybe I would have realized where his attention would lead.

ARIA

Lily spent the summer with us in New York after Mother’s death, and I was happy having her around, especially since she lost that forlorn air after a while. She returned to being the life-affirming sister I knew. I should have known Romero was the reason for it, but I had ignored all the signs, hoping I was wrong, until reality slapped me in the face one day during our holidays in our mansion in the Hamptons.

Luca and I had been on our way to have lunch in a small bistro close by when he'd gotten a call because of a Bratva incident and had to leave for the city without me. I headed back to the mansion to ask my sister if she wanted to join me for lunch instead. "Lily, I—" I froze when I spotted Romero on top of Lily on the couch, his hand shoved up her shirt. Romero jerked back, his arms draped in front of his groin area, but I had seen the bulge.

I closed the door, glad that Luca wasn't here to see it.

Lily quickly tried to smooth down her hair, but there was nothing she could do about her swollen lips. "This isn't how it looks," she said.

I raised my eyebrows then glared at Romero. He had the decency to look guilty, as he should. "That's why I didn't want you alone with her, Romero. I knew this would happen!"

"You make it sound like I had nothing to do with it. It wasn't only Romero's doing," Lily muttered, but I could only look at Romero. He was a man. One girl more or less didn't mean anything, but for Lily to be caught with a man before marriage would be her ruin. He *knew* it.

"Why are you back anyway? Shouldn't you be having lunch with your husband?" Lily asked.

I couldn't believe her. Didn't she realize what kind of situation she was in? What kind of situation I was in because I'd caught them? "Are you blaming me for this? Luca got a call that there was trouble in one of the clubs. Something with one of the Russian underbosses, so he dropped me off in the driveway and headed straight to New York. You're lucky he didn't come in."

"If you tell Luca…," Romero began, as if I didn't know what would happen if Luca found out Romero had touched the daughter of the Outfit's

Consigliere, as if I didn’t know what would happen to Romero because he’d gone against Luca’s direct orders.

“I won’t tell him,” I said angrily. “I know what he’ll have to do if I do.”

Romero helped Lily up, and the look they shared tore at my heart because I knew they couldn’t be together. Romero met my gaze. “He’s your husband. You owe him the truth.”

My insides turned because he was right, but he also knew I couldn’t tell Luca. He knew I couldn’t condemn both him and Lily. And more than that, I couldn’t baggage Luca like that. His family and the Bratva were still giving him enough trouble; he didn’t need the weight of having to decide what to do with Romero. Luca liked Romero, he valued him as his best soldier. If he found out what Romero had done, he’d be faced with a decision I didn’t want to burden him with.

Even as I warned them to stay away from each other, I knew it was too late for that—but I had to hope things would miraculously solve themselves.

A few weeks later, after Father had called Lily back to Chicago, things really took a turn for the worse.

Shouting drew my eyes up from the folders with the Pergola’s forged earnings from the last months. Luca jumped out of his chair and stormed out of the office. I followed close behind him.

Romero was pummeling one of the other soldiers.

“Hey! What’s going on here?” Luca growled. He gripped Romero’s arms and pulled them behind his back. “Romero, what the hell are you doing? Calm the fuck down.”

Matteo knelt beside the injured soldier, who was bleeding from a wound on his head and from his nose. My fingers on the folders with the forged books tightened. If Romero was this rattled, it could only mean one thing: Lily.

Matteo helped the soldier up and sent him off, but I barely paid them attention.

I walked up to Romero. “Did something happen with Lily?”

“You can let me go now,” he told Luca, who released him, then turned his narrowed eyes on me.

“Why would Romero know if something was wrong with Lily?” Luca asked carefully.

I didn’t say anything, keeping my eyes on Romero, but Luca’s eyes remained on me. “Your father has arranged a marriage with Benito Brasci for her,” Romero murmured.

I gasped. “What? He never mentioned that he was looking for a husband for her!” I glanced at Luca. “Or did he mention anything to you?”

Luca’s expression was stone. “No, he hasn’t. But right now I’m more concerned about the fact that Romero knows about this before anyone else, and that he almost kills one of my men because of it.”

“Lily and I have been seeing each other during the summer,” Romero said, and my stomach did a flip. Now that he’d admitted to it, Luca would realize I’d been in on it.

Matteo let out a low whistle.

Luca got into Romero’s face. “Didn’t you tell me not too long ago that you weren’t interested in her? That there wouldn’t be a fucking problem when she was around? I remember that conversation pretty damn well, and now you’re fucking telling me that you were *seeing* Liliana behind my fucking back all summer?”

Luca looked murderous. I touched his arm and positioned myself halfway between them. “Luca, please don’t get mad at Romero. He and Lily didn’t mean any harm. They fell in love. It just happened.”

“And you knew all along?” Luca muttered. “You knew and didn’t tell me? Didn’t we have a discussion about loyalty and trust when you helped Gianna run away?”

I blanched. He was right. For him it was betrayal if I kept things like this from him, and it wasn’t like I didn’t know that. “They are my sisters.”

“And I’m your fucking husband.”

“Luca, she didn’t mean—” Romero began.

Luca jabbed his fingers against Romero’s chest. “You stay the fuck out of this. You’re lucky I don’t put a bullet into your head right this second for going against my orders.”

“Hey, calm down, Luca. Maybe it’s not as bad as it sounds,” Matteo said, surprising me. Usually he was the one adding fuel to the fire.

“Oh, I suspect it’s exactly as bad as I think it is,” Luca murmured. His eyes fixed on Romero. “Just tell me this: will we be in trouble on Liliana’s wedding night?”

“Lily won’t marry that guy. Isn’t he over fifty? It’s ridiculous,” I said.

“Over fifty and a nasty piece of shit,” Matteo added.

Luca glared at Romero. “*Will* there be a fucking problem on her wedding night?”

“I slept with Lily,” he said calmly. I cringed at his admittance.

Luca cursed. “Why couldn’t you leave your dick in your pants? Couldn’t you at least have drawn the line at actually fucking her?”

“I don’t regret it,” Romero said. “Now less than ever.”

“This is a fucking mess. Do you realize what happens if Benito Brasci finds out his wife isn’t a virgin? Scuderi will figure out it happened in New

York, and we'll be screwed."

"I don't think there will be a problem. I stood beside Brasci at the urinal once. That guy's cock is tiny. He can't possibly expect there to be any blood on the sheets with that small sausage. Liliana probably won't even notice his cock in her," Matteo joked.

Romero lunged at Matteo.

At *Matteo.* They faced off, knives pointed at each other.

"Enough!" Luca roared, shoving them apart. "I'm going to put you down like rabid dogs if you don't get a grip on yourselves right this second."

"He started it," Matteo said. He had *that gleam* in his eyes. That gleam that reminded me of what he was. Of what both Luca and he were. It was easy to forget sometimes when we sat around the dining table like a normal family.

"You provoked him," I said. "What you said was horrible."

Matteo rolled his eyes. "My God, I was trying to lighten the mood."

"You failed," Luca said coldly. "Now put your knives away. Both of you."

Romero sheathed his knife and Matteo did the same.

"I shouldn't have attacked you," Romero said eventually.

Matteo nodded. "I should keep my mouth shut now and then."

"But she's not pregnant, is she?" Luca asked after a moment.

Romero shook his head.

"Then maybe we'll get out of this unscathed. Brasci might not notice, and there are ways to fake bloodstains on the sheets," Luca said. He didn't look my way, though I guessed he was thinking about our wedding night, how he'd bled for me, and now I had kept a secret from him again. I knew he didn't always tell me everything that happened in the Famiglia, but that

was different. He kept secrets to protect me from the horrors of his world. I kept secrets to protect my sisters.

“She won’t marry that man,” Romero said.

Luca raised his eyebrows. “Oh, won’t she? Are you thinking about stopping Scuderi? Maybe kidnap Lily and marry her?”

It was clear that Romero was hell-bent on risking a conflict with Luca. Romero, who had always been loyal, who was Luca’s best soldier. All because of Lily. He must love her.

I touched Luca’s arm. “Luca, please. Can’t you talk to my father?”

“Talk to him and tell him what?” Luca growled, gray eyes hard as they settled on me. “That my best soldier screwed his daughter and wants her for himself? That I broke my oath to protect Liliana, that she’s lost her fucking honor? That will go over *fucking well*.”

“No, but you could tell him that Gianna and I want our sister in New York with us and ask if he wouldn’t consider marrying her to someone from the Famiglia. You wouldn’t have to tell him to whom right away. It would give us time to figure something out.”

“I can’t get involved. It’s none of my business. And if your father has already promised Liliana to Brasci, he won’t change his mind. It would make him look bad and offend Brasci.”

“But we have to do something!” I begged, my grip tightening.

“I won’t go to war over this!” Luca roared back, shaking off my hands as he stepped back.

I quieted, stunned by his fierce anger. It wasn’t only directed at Romero, but also at me.

“Fuck!” he snarled and stalked back into his office.

I followed Luca. Since I’d started working the books, I’d often worked at Luca’s desk when he’d been out or even when he had been around. I

closed the door. Luca sat in his desk chair, and regarded me with a deep frown.

I hesitated in the center of the room as I was again confronted by his fury.

“I thought we’d agreed that you wouldn’t keep secrets from me again. Not after what happened with Gianna. You remember the promise you gave me?”

I did. I moved around the desk and stopped in front of Luca. “I do. I hoped things would solve themselves. I only wanted Lily to be happy. Romero and she are in love. It’s something beautiful. Something I didn’t want to have destroyed.” I eased between his legs and rested my palms against his chest as he leaned back in the chair to scan my face.

“Destroyed by me?”

“You are Capo. You would have stopped Romero from pursuing Lily. You have to put the Famiglia first, but I don’t.”

He straightened so our faces were on the same level. His eyes were fierce. “You should put our marriage first. And when have I ever put the Famiglia before you? I should, damn it, I shouldn’t even consider you when I make decisions that concern the Famiglia, but I always do and you know that.”

“I know,” I whispered. “Am I not allowed some secrets? I didn’t want to burden you on top of everything else that’s been going on, and I didn’t think she’d have to marry so soon.”

“When it comes to your siblings, you never think things through to the end. You are too emotional.”

“You would keep a secret for Matteo, wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t turn this on me,” he said quietly.

I ran my hand up his neck and into his dark hair. He didn't relax under my touch, but he didn't pull away either, which I took as a good sign. "Everyone's got secrets. I'd never keep something from you that concerned our relationship."

"Are you sure you can draw a line?" Luca asked.

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Luca. That's all I can say. We'll figure a way out of this mess."

"Your sister will marry Brasci and pretend to be a virgin. That's all there is to do. We won't figure out anything."

Luca's voice didn't brook an argument, but the idea of letting Lily take the fall didn't sit well with me.

"We can't let her marry that man."

"You married a man you feared because it was for the good of the Outfit, Gianna married a man she didn't want, and now your sister Lily will have to do the same."

"That's not the same thing. We are close in age and so are Gianna and Matteo, and you and Matteo aren't sadistic to women."

"But you didn't know that before you married me, Aria. You feared me like the devil, flinched from my touch, expected me to rape and beat you, and yet you said yes. You did what was expected because you know the rules of our world, and even your sister Gianna accepted her fate after that one mishap. You can't protect Lily from this world."

I pressed my forehead against his. "I feared you, but you proved me wrong. You gifted me with something I'd thought impossible in our world," I whispered. Luca's eyes were keen and softer than before, but the hint of anger remained. "You gifted me with love and tenderness, and there are no words to express how very grateful I feel. I know both are rare in our world,

and I don’t want you to think I take your love or your trust for granted, because I don’t. I know it’s an honor that you are like that with me.”

I fell silent and Luca didn’t say anything either, but his hands came up to my waist, the touch light. I took one of his hands and pressed a kiss to the scar in his palm. “I’m grateful that these hands always treat me with care when they have had to perform so many violent deeds.”

Luca pulled me closer, his lips finding mine, before he retreated again and murmured, “I’m still angry at you, but I appreciate what you said.”

I nodded. I knew he’d forgive me because deep down he understood I hadn’t gone against him. I’d only acted out of concern for my sister.

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chapter 12

LUCA

In late October, Aria and I had been invited to dinner at Dante's home two days before Liliana was supposed to marry Brasci. So far nobody suspected anything, and I could only hope that it would remain that way in their wedding night.

It became obvious the moment we set foot into his home that Dante wasn't all that happy about having me in his house, and I got it. His wife was pregnant and vulnerable, and somewhere in the house slept his defenseless child. Even if there was peace between us, that didn't mean we trusted each other. Things hadn't exactly improved since the beginning of the truce. Except for not attacking each other, we'd hardly worked together in the last few years, and if Liliana didn't manage to convince Brasci she was a virgin, war would be the result.

Aria and I stepped into the lobby of the Cavallaro villa, and my eyes did a quick scan of our surroundings. Valentina was heavily pregnant. She hugged Aria then turned to me with a more restrained smile. She was a very controlled woman, not as controlled as Dante, of course, but no one was. Despite her restraint, she couldn't hide her unease around me. I kissed her hand, sparing her the decision if she should hug me. The way that small kiss already made Dante tense, it was for the best that I hadn't embraced her.

My eyes slanted to Aria. If she were pregnant, I wouldn't have Dante anywhere near her, but Aria wasn't and I was glad. Life was too dangerous

at the moment, and I wasn't really cut out to be a father.

"It's a pleasure to have you over for dinner," Valentina said with a small smile. Dante inclined his head but his eyes sent a very different message. My grip on Aria's hand tightened as we followed them into the dining room and settled around the set table. Dante and I sat across from each other, and my muscles tightened because of his expression.

"Your sister will be a gorgeous bride," Valentina said, trying to break the tense silence.

"Maybe it will distract from the fact that she was given to an old man like a piece of meat," Aria said with a sharp look toward Dante.

I squeezed her hand in warning, but she didn't look away from Dante. I didn't either because I wanted to make sure I knew when I'd have to pull my gun.

"Your father wants the best for…"

"Himself," Aria interrupted Dante, and I tightened my hold. She winced but still didn't stop. "After all, he got a child-bride in return for selling off my sister."

"Aria, that's enough." My voice was sharp like a whip.

Her eyes finally found me. If we'd been alone she might have stood up to me, but we were in a room with Dante and she knew I had to show strength in front of him. Reluctantly she lowered her eyes, swallowing hard. After a moment, she turned to Dante. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any disrespect."

Dante gave a terse nod. The maids showed up with the food not a second too late. We managed to go through the rest of dinner without any further incidents, and Val and Aria soon engaged in a relaxed conversation about the south of Italy, which Dante and I could join without any risks of more conflicts.

My mobile vibrated in my pocket and I took it out, risking a glance down. It was Matteo. I held up my phone. “I have to take this,” I said as I rose from my chair and walked out of the dining room and into the entrance hall. Dante’s eyes followed me. He obviously didn’t like the idea of me walking through his house alone, but he had no reason to worry. If I had something devious in mind, I wouldn’t have left Aria alone at a table with him.

“Matteo? What is it?”

“I’m worried about Romero. He looks like he’s going to lose his shit. I’m not sure it was a good idea to take him to Chicago with us.”

I sighed. “I know. Make sure he doesn’t do something stupid.”

“I’m not sure I’m the right man for the job.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I muttered in a low voice. “I’m busy over here.”

I hung up, wanting to return to Aria. Her being alone with Dante and Val didn’t sit well with me.

Movement up on the stairs made me tense and turn to face the source, my body going into high alert. I paused with my hand on the gun, then slowly lowered it when I saw a tiny girl on the second to last step. Dante’s daughter, Anna.

“Where are Mommy and Daddy?” she whispered.

“In the dining room,” I said, not moving. Her blue eyes scanned me from head to toe, and I hoped she wouldn’t start crying. I didn’t think Dante would wait for an explanation before he tried to shoot me, and I really wasn’t looking forward to killing him in front of his kid.

“Who are you?” she said accusingly, and I had to stifle a laugh.

“I’m your godmother Aria’s husband.”

A grin spread on the girl’s face and she stumbled forward. I moved without thinking and stopped her fall by circling her body with my arm and

lifting her up. She didn’t cry as I’d expected. Instead she wrapped her arms around my neck. “Is Aria with Mommy and Daddy?”

I nodded as I tried to set her back down, but she clung to me. “No!” she protested. “Take me to Aria!”

I glanced down at the girl. “Is that an order?”

She gave a sharp nod.

Sighing, I held her against me with one arm as I made my way back to the dining room. Dante wouldn’t like this, but if she started wailing because I didn’t do what she wanted, things would get even uglier.

The moment I stepped into the dining room with the girl, Dante rose and his eyes would have sent most people running. “She came down the stairs and wanted me to take her to Aria,” I said firmly. I got that Dante was protective. Fuck, I probably would have put a bullet in his head if our positions were reversed.

Aria stood, probably to go to me, but Dante gave a shake of his head and she froze.

Fury shot through me and I had a fucking hard time controlling it. I unfastened Anna’s arms and put her down. “Thanks,” she said with a huge grin before she started running toward Aria, unaware of the tension in the room. Valentina gripped Dante’s arm and tugged until he finally sank back down on his chair. Anna jumped onto Aria, who hugged the girl to her chest and kissed her cheek. Aria looked fucking ecstatic with the kid in her arm.

I approached the table slowly, still wary of Dante, and his eyes told me that he shared the sentiment. Aria gave me a meaningful look.

“Dante, perhaps now would be a good time to talk in private,” I said in a civil tone.

Dante gave a sharp nod and stood.

Val touched his forearm briefly, and I caught the warning in her gaze. Aria, too, was pleading me with her eyes to keep it together.

Dante and I walked out of the room and he led me out into the garden. The cold helped to clear my mind. “I am well aware that you don’t like me around your wife and child,” I said. “And I don’t like you around Aria either.”

Dante inclined his head. “We are at peace, but in the past that hasn’t always prevented accidents.”

He was probably referring to the truce between the Famiglia, the Camorra and the Outfit that had been broken by the Camorra by murdering the wife of the Boss of the Outfit. That had happened sixty years ago, but some things were remembered.

“We are both men of honor, Dante. You don’t like me and I don’t like you, but I can assure you that your wife and children are safe from me. I don’t prey on the weak.”

Dante gave me a closed-lipped smile. “Will that still be the case if truce was ever broken between us?”

“I could ask you the same—would Aria be safe if there was war between us?”

Dante didn’t say anything because we both knew that war was an unpredictable beast. “She’d be safe from certain things in my territory even in times of war. No woman, enemy or not, will ever have to fear rape in my territory.”

“That’s something I can guarantee as well.”

Neither of us said any more because there really wasn’t anything else to say. I knew that the voices in the Outfit that wanted to cancel the truce had grown louder, as they had in the Famiglia. It was old hatred that had only been buried, but not forgotten.

I’d attended countless weddings from a young age. They had all been tense to some degree, as was to be expected with arranged marriages, but Scuderi’s wedding to the Brasci girl topped it all. The girl was younger than Aria, and Aria’s father was over fifty. That was sick even by our standards. But that on its own wouldn’t have made me tense. No, that was all thanks to Romero and Lily. They had both been gone after the ceremony. It didn’t take a genius to guess what they were doing. To hell with them. She was supposed to marry Brasci tomorrow!

“I don’t get it. She’s younger than two of his daughters,” I said with a nod toward Scuderi and his too young wife. He was grinning all over his face. No wonder. He’d get to pop a girl’s cherry thirty years his junior.

“Some traditions are harder to change than others,” Dante said, but I caught the hint of disapproval for his Consigliere’s choice. We’d returned to being civil, at least in front of our gathered men. It wouldn’t do to send them the wrong message. Brasci and Scuderi had made the arrangement and as I knew very well, the influence of a Capo regarding family matters was very limited.

“I’m glad that Valentina is close to my age. It makes it easier to find topics to discuss,” Dante said.

I nodded. He had married a woman who had been married before. That had broken with tradition, but it was his choice. He couldn’t force the same choice on others. If it were my choice alone, I’d have stopped the tradition of bloody sheets long ago, but I had a family I needed to appease. Capo or not, I needed their support. Ruling over the East Coast wasn’t a one-man show.

His attention shifted past me toward a young girl, perhaps twelve or thirteen, with the same blonde hair as Dante. I'd often wondered why the Outfit had so many blondes. Perhaps it was because many of the families were originally from Genoa and Bologna in the north of Italy. The girl approached us. She held herself with surprising pride for someone that young, but she didn't meet my gaze, only curtsied briefly before she turned to Dante.

"Mom told me to find you for a dance," she said in a lilting voice. Her eyes darted up to me, cheeks flushing. This must have been one of her first social events. It was obvious that she was unaccustomed to males that didn't belong to her family. And I knew why she had been sent over, Dante's sister had probably picked up on the underlying tension between her brother and me.

Dante put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "This is my niece, Serafina," he introduced her. His voice held obvious protectiveness. She squared her shoulders and met my gaze. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

I shook my head. "I'm not that old."

Dante narrowed his eyes, and I had to stop a smirk. His family was a stickler for proper behavior, but that proper exterior was a façade and we both knew it. Dante harbored the same demons I did. "If you'll excuse us." He didn't wait for my reply; instead he led the girl away and set out to dance with her.

I turned my back to them, and spotted Romero making his way toward Lily. Hadn't he done enough? If they both disappeared from the wedding twice together, things would look really fucking bad. That was an encounter I couldn't let happen, not in front of the gathered Outfit. I pushed forward and reached Lily first.

“Dance with me,” I ordered. It wasn’t how I usually asked a woman to dance, but I was already losing my fucking patience again. Her eyes widened but she took my hand. I led her to a less crowded part of the dance floor before I pulled her against me, closer than was proper, but I didn’t want people to overhear our conversation.

She was tense in my hold, and a faint blush covered her cheeks. Was she embarrassed because I knew what she’d done? I wouldn’t have cared that she’d fucked around before her wedding if it wasn’t one of my soldiers she’d chosen to dishonor her. That was a fucking problem, *my fucking problem*. “You are still going through with this marriage? You and Romero were gone for a while.”

“Yes. I will marry Benito, don’t worry,” she said quietly, but her body became stiff in my hold. She was scared. Her face resembled Aria’s in some aspect, and they both worried their lower lip the same way when they were anxious. Damn it.

“You don’t have to stay married to him forever,” I said because I knew Aria wouldn’t stop worrying for one second as long as Lily was married to Brasci.

Lily gave a small shake of her head, her eyes meeting mine. “Father would never agree to a divorce.”

She was right. Scuderi had never given a shit about his daughters’ happiness. For him they were something he could bargain with, an asset to use to his advantage. If he were a decent father, he would have never agreed to marry Aria off to me. My reputation preceded me and couldn’t have given him any doubt that I’d break his daughter.

“There are other ways out of a marriage than divorce. Sometimes people die,” I said, but Lily’s reply made it clear that she didn’t catch my drift.

“He’s not that old.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Sometimes people *die* anyway.”

She faltered in her steps but I moved her along. She had to work on her poker face. “Why can’t he die before my wedding?” she asked, her eyes begging me, but even for Aria I couldn’t make that happen. If I let Romero kill Brasci, which he’d gladly do, as became apparent from the death glares he sent the old fucker whenever he felt unobserved, there would be war.

“That would look suspicious. Wait a few months. The time will pass quickly, trust me.”

She shuddered against me. “Romero won’t want me anymore then.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I wasn’t sure if Romero would want Lily after Brasci had fucked her for months. It was a hard thing to stomach. If he loved her, he might be able to ignore it, but I didn’t know the extent of his feelings. I doubted he would have taken Lily’s virginity if he didn’t harbor feelings for her. Romero was too honorable for that, but sometimes feelings changed. “There are good men in the Outfit too. You’ll find new happiness. You’re doing the right thing by marrying Benito. You’re preventing war and you’re protecting Romero from himself. That’s a brave thing to do,” I told her.

It wasn’t any kind of consolation for her, and I knew that, but I was Capo of the Famiglia, and Lily wasn’t mine to protect, even if the thought didn’t sit well with me. She didn’t deserve that fate, but in our life we were often dealt shitty cards.

I returned her to her table. Aria caught my eyes from where she stood against the wall, deep in conversation with Valentina.

Something in my expression must have showed Aria that I hadn’t changed my mind about her sister and Romero. I couldn’t risk everything for their feelings.

Romero had gone against my direct orders by pursuing Lily. That I hadn't punished him harshly was already more than others would have received from me in return. Aria's face filled with resignation and disappointment. She wouldn't try to argue with me again, but I knew she didn't like my decision. After her first apology for keeping everything from me, she'd tried to convince me to help her sister, but when I'd refused she'd retreated. She was drawn back, and I hadn't made a move to smooth things between us. I was the one who had reason to be angry, after all.

"You and Aria have been married for longer than Dante and Valentina, and yet they are onto their second child and Aria isn't even pregnant yet," Scuderi said sharply as he walked up to me. We had been married for more than four years, and I knew people in the Famiglia were wondering when Aria would finally get pregnant, but I had no intention of becoming a father anytime soon. I enjoyed having Aria to myself, and she was still young, only twenty-two. We had plenty of time.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "That's none of your business. You should worry about your new wife now."

"She will be pregnant before Aria, I can guarantee you that," Scuderi said with a disgusting leer at his wife, who stood amidst girls her age.

Soldiers from the Outfit I didn't know joined us, and I used the excuse to leave. I would have cut Scuderi's tongue out if I'd talked to him a moment longer. It was none of his or anyone's business when, and if, Aria and I decided it was time to start a family. My father had been a fucking nightmare, and I wasn't sure that he hadn't rubbed off on me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to subject children to that kind of thing. Eventually, I might need to produce an heir, but definitely not anytime soon.

ARIA

Lily was a sight to behold in her wedding dress, a sight that broke my heart to pieces because she wasn't allowed to marry the man she loved. "You look beautiful," I told her as I arranged her veil over her shoulders. Her face reflected misery as she met my gaze in the mirror. I'd felt the same way on my wedding day, had been terrified and hopeless, but unlike Lily I didn't have someone I wanted to marry instead. Lily's marriage wouldn't turn out to be a blessing in disguise like my marriage to Luca had. There were no consoling words I could offer my sister that wouldn't have sounded false.

"This is crap," Gianna muttered. She touched Lily's shoulder. "Lily, get the hell away from here. Let us help you. What's the use of being married to the Capo and the Consigliere of the Famiglia if we can't force them to start a war for our little sister? You're going to be miserable."

Gianna knew I had tried everything I could to convince Luca, and she hadn't stopped bugging Matteo about it either, but to no avail. I couldn't go behind Luca's back again, not when he was still hurt because I'd kept Lily's relationship with Romero a secret. It was so very difficult to take care of my family like I wanted and not go against Luca.

"Luca said I could get rid of Benito in a few months when it won't look suspicious anymore," Lily whispered. A few months? The mere idea of having to bear Brasci's touch sent shivers of disgust down my back, and I knew Lily felt the same way.

Gianna snorted. "Oh sure, and what until then? My God, could Luca be any more of a jerk?"

Luca was Capo. He was willing to put me before the Famiglia, but that was all. He wouldn't help Lily, no matter how much I begged.

"Are you and Luca still fighting?" Lily asked.

“I wouldn’t call it fighting. We’re basically ignoring each other. He’s angry at me for keeping you and Romero a secret from him, and I’m mad at him for making you marry Brasci.” Though ignoring wasn’t quite right either. We talked and we slept with each other but there was a barrier between us, an invisible wall of disappointment and hurt.

“He isn’t making me, Aria. Father is. Luca’s acting like a Capo should. I’m not his responsibility, but the Famiglia is.”

I knew she was right but I didn’t like it. I didn’t like that we women always had to pay the price so the men could stay in power.

“Good God, Romero has really rubbed off on you. Please tell me you don’t really believe what you just said,” Gianna said.

“I won’t have you all risk everything for me.”

Gianna smacked her forehead in exasperation. “We want to risk it for you. But you have to let us.”

I wasn’t sure what to do if Lily said yes. I had to tell Luca about it if we helped Lily escape. I was too scared to lose him completely.

Someone knocked and a moment later, Maria, the girl my father had married, poked her head in. “You need to come out now.”

She disappeared without another word. I shuddered when I thought of Father being married to a girl Lily’s age. It was wrong.

“I can’t believe Father is married to her,” Gianna said, echoing my thoughts. “I don’t like her but I still feel sorry for her. Father is a bastard.”

Lily lowered her veil over her face. “We should go now.”

“Lily,” I began, not even sure what I wanted to tell her, how to make this situation better; but before I could utter another word, she straightened her spine, blinked, and headed for the door. Outside our father was already waiting to lead her down the aisle. I sent him a glower. The days when I’d

felt respect or even fear toward him were gone. He was the root of our misery, and for that I'd never forgive him.

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chapter 13

ARIA

The wedding celebrations passed in a blur and when the first shouts rang out that asked for the groom to bed the bride, I felt sick. Lily tried to appear strong, but I could see behind her mask, could see the terror and fear, and it broke me apart. Matteo practically had to hold Gianna in place to stop her from going after our sister, but I was frozen.

Helplessness. It wasn't the first time I'd felt it, but today it reached new levels.

"Come on," Luca said quietly when Brasci and Lily had disappeared in their shared bedroom. His hand was warm as it closed around mine, and I allowed him to lead me toward our own bedroom in the Brasci mansion. We shouldn't have agreed to my father's suggestion to spend the night there. The door fell shut behind us, and my throat closed up. I turned away from Luca and walked toward the bed. I remembered our first night in a room together, our wedding night.

I'd been terrified of Luca, of consummating our marriage, but Luca had showed kindness, had treated me with respect, and had continued to do so since we were married. I had been lucky.

Lily wouldn't be that lucky. Brasci was a nasty piece of shit, or that was how Matteo had put it. I had seen it in his eyes. I knew rape was still common in some marriages in our world. It wasn't called by that name because our old-fashioned traditions still viewed the woman's body as the

husband's possession, but it was a dark presence in many women's lives. Gianna and I had been lucky. I'd always thought Lily would be too. I had been wrong.

I began to cry for Lily, and for Romero. For their impossible love. I didn't let my mind wander to what could be happening in the bedroom down the hall. I couldn't bear it. Luca came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders like he'd done on our wedding night more than four years ago. Back then his touch hadn't brought me comfort, but now it did.

"Aria," he murmured.

His gentle tone made me cry even harder, and he slid an arm around my waist and pulled me against him. He was warm and strong. His lips brushed my cheek, which was wet with tears. "It's unfair," I whispered through my clogged-up throat. "It's almost like all the good luck was granted to me and Gianna, and now nothing is left for Lily."

Luca turned me around to face him and tilted my head up. His face was kind. "Don't blame yourself, Aria. It's got nothing to do with luck or fate. Life's unfair, that's how it is."

"No," I said harshly. "That's not how it is for everyone. That's not how it is for men. Were you terrified before our wedding night? No. You were probably excited because you wanted to claim me."

Luca sighed and wiped tears off my cheek. "Yes, I was excited, Aria, up until the point when I realized you were terrified, and you know that."

"I know," I said. "But Brasci won't care that Lily is terrified. Nothing will stop him from raping her."

Luca bent low until our foreheads touched. "Fuck, Aria. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to drag the asshole out of that bedroom and cut his throat? Because right this second, I want to fucking do it because I hate to see you so broken up. The only thing stopping me is the

knowledge that I'd risk your life. If I kill Brasci or if Romero kills him, then we are at war with the Outfit."

"Perhaps we won't have to kill him…" I trailed off, realizing how foolish it was. Brasci wouldn't let Lily leave the bedroom. We'd have to knock him out at the very least, and that would lead to war, too.

I tipped my head up and brushed my lips across Luca's. His brows pulled together. "What's that for?"

I forced a shaky smile. "For wanting to risk everything because of me. I don't deserve you."

He shook his head, but the ring of his mobile stopped him from saying anything. He raised the mobile to his ear and his face transformed into a mask of shock, then fury.

"Damn it, Romero!" he snarled. I stepped back, my pulse racing. "So let me get this straight—you are in a room with Lily and Benito?"

There was an answer on the other end.

"Damn it!" Luca growled. He hung up and lowered the phone.

Then he turned to me. "Did anything happen to Lily?" I whispered.

He glared. "She and Romero started war with the Outfit!"

LUCA

Aria stared at me uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean?" She sounded scared but probably for the wrong reasons. I bet her all her worry was for her sister.

"Romero killed Brasci. He's with your sister now."

Aria didn't say anything, but relief showed on her face. I didn't blame her. She only cared about her sister's safety. She didn't know what that

meant, didn’t know that Romero had forced me to make a decision I’d never wanted to make.

“We’ll have to go to them now,” I told her as I gathered my guns and knives and arranged them in the holsters on my chest, back and calves.

Aria watched me with dawning worry. “We’ll have to run, right? If Brasci is dead, Dante will declare war on us.”

I gave a terse nod then I held out my hand for her to take. That was one option. The other was to show Dante I didn’t approve of Romero’s actions. “Come on. We need to hurry.”

She slipped her small hand in mine, and I led her out of our bedroom and down the hallway where Liliana and Brasci were supposed to spend their wedding night.

I scanned our surroundings and listened for suspicious noises, but only the sound of music and distant laughter carried over. The party was still going strong. My mouth tightened. Seven years. That’s how long we’d managed to keep peace between the Outfit and the Famiglia, and tonight the feud would break open again, probably worse than before. Dante was a proud man, and he would have to retaliate. If someone killed one of my men in my territory, I would hunt them down and slice them into tiny pieces.

Aria was surprisingly quiet at my side. Perhaps she’d realized the danger of the situation.

I knocked at the bedroom door and Romero opened it a moment later. Aria unfastened her hand and slipped in, hurrying toward her sister who perched on the edge of the bed.

Romero met my gaze, and he didn’t try to look like he felt sorry. At least he was being honest. I walked past him into the bedroom.

“My God, Lily. What happened? Are you okay?” Aria asked, but I had eyes only for the dead body in the center of the room. Brasci lay on his side, a letter opener sticking out of his stomach. I moved nearer and got down to take a closer look. The letter opener hadn’t killed Brasci. A knife had gone in right below his ribs and pierced his heart. That was Romero’s doing as I’d expected.

I raised my gaze to Liliana, who froze. “What happened here?”

She looked at Romero as if she wasn’t sure which lie to tell. I couldn’t believe them. “I want the fucking truth!”

“Luca,” Aria scolded. “Lily is obviously in shock. Give her a moment.”

“We don’t have a fucking moment. We have a dead Outfit member in a room with us. Things will get ugly very soon.”

Aria turned back to her sister. “Lily, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. He didn’t have time to hurt me.”

I didn’t give a fuck about any of this. We were in huge trouble. By killing Brasci, Romero had brought down the wrath of the Outfit on us at a time when we were already at war with the Bratva, not to mention a few MCs kept giving us trouble in Atlanta, Charleston and even New Jersey.

“Enough,” I growled, losing my fucking patience with all of them. I glared at Romero. “I want answers. Remember your oath.”

Romero’s gaze was steady. He’d always been a good soldier until now, but this wasn’t a small fuckup. For what he did today, there was only one logical consequence, and we both knew it.

“I always do.”

I pointed at Brasci. “That doesn’t look like it. Or are you saying that Liliana did this alone?”

Romero shook his head. “Liliana is innocent. Benito was still alive when I arrived. She’d stabbed him with the letter opener because he

attacked her. It was self-defense on her part."

Right. "Self-defense?" I echoed. I doubted Brasci had done anything that anyone in this house hadn't expected him to do. These were the rules of our world. I narrowed my eyes at Liliana. "What did he do?"

"He tried to force himself on her," Romero said.

"I didn't ask you!" I snarled. Aria tried to appease me with a hand on my arm, but I had no intention of calming down. This wasn't a minor transgression. That Liliana had stabbed Brasci would have caused major problems for her because she'd denied him something he had a right to as her husband. "And if he tried to consummate the marriage, nobody in this fucking house will see it as self-defense. Benito had a fucking right to her body. He was her husband, for god's sake!"

Romero took a step forward but stopped himself. I eyed him, daring him to attack like he wanted to. It would take this fucking decision out of my hands.

"You can't be serious," Aria said, eyes imploring.

She knew what was expected on a wedding night as well as I did. Nobody would care that Liliana didn't want to marry Brasci, that she had fought him. I didn't make the rules nor did Dante, but neither of us had the power to change a tradition without the support of the other soldiers and their families. "You know the rules, Aria. I'm stating the facts."

Aria shook her head. "I don't care. A husband doesn't have the right to rape his wife. Everyone in this house should agree on that!"

Aria was too soft for this world, too caring, but even she knew that most women were claimed on their wedding night. In the beginning I'd sometimes regretted that I'd spared her on our wedding day, but later I'd realized it had been the best decision of my life. If I'd hurt Aria on our wedding night, she would have never forgiven me.

Romero went over to Liliana and wrapped his arm around her.

Love. Father had always told Matteo and me that it was a weakness, and I had to admit he had been right. It weakened me, it weakened Matteo, and now it weakened Romero, and in consequence it weakened the Famiglia. My uncles would attack like vultures once word got out about this. “I told you this would end in disaster. So let me guess, Liliana stabbed her husband, called you and you finished the fucking job to have her for yourself.”

“Yes,” Romero said. “And to protect her. If he’d survived he would have blamed Liliana, and she would have been punished harshly by the Outfit.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “And now she won’t? They will put her on trial and they will not only punish her harshly, they will also accuse us of having set this up, and then there will be a fucking bloodbath. Dante is a cold fish but he needs to show strength. He will proclaim war in no time. All because you can’t control your dick and your heart.”

“As if you could do it. You’d take down anyone who’d try to take Aria away from you,” Romero said.

My eyes slanted to Aria. Her concerned blue eyes locked on mine. I’d burn down the world to protect Aria. If anyone tried to take her away, I’d kill them and anyone else who got in my way. “But Aria is my wife. That’s a huge difference.”

“If it was up to me, Lily would have been my wife for months.”

Did he really think about marrying her? Did he really think we were all getting out of this house alive? “Someone is going to pay for this. As Capo of the Famiglia I need to put the blame on Liliana, and hope Dante buys it and doesn’t start a war.”

Aria’s grip on my arm tightened, her eyes full of unshed tears. “You can’t do that.”

Romero got down on his knees in front of me, arms spread wide. “I’m going to take the full blame for this. Tell them I lost my mind and ran after Liliana because I’ve wanted her for months. I killed Benito when he tried to defend Lily and himself, but before I could rape her, you noticed I was missing and went in search of me. Then there won’t be war between the Outfit and New York, and Lily will get the chance at a new life.”

He meant it, but nobody would believe that story. Yet, that he would put down his life for Liliana showed how serious he was about the girl. What was it with the Scuderi women that made us all go insane? “If that’s the story we want them to believe, there’s something missing,” I said.

Romero nodded. “I will put my life down for this. Shoot me.”

“No!” Aria screamed, but I shook her hand off and stared into Romero’s determined eyes. I’d known him almost all my life. We’d partied together, got drunk together, fought and killed together. Next to Matteo he was the man I trusted most. That was why he had been allowed to guard Aria. I knew he would have never lain a hand on her.

Liliana moved between Romero and me. Fear twisted her face. Fear of me and my decision. I was used to that look from people around me.

“Please,” she whispered, eyes begging me, hoping to appeal to a side only Aria could reach. “Please don’t kill him. I’ll do anything, just please don’t. I can’t live without him.”

She started crying but it didn’t affect me like Aria’s tears did.

Romero got up and pulled Liliana away. “Lily, don’t. I’m a soldier of the Famiglia. I broke my oath to always put the Famiglia first, and I have to accept the due punishment.”

“I don’t care about any oaths. I don’t want to lose you,” Liliana said.

I reached for my gun, needing to get this over with, but Aria appeared in front of me and rested her palms against my chest, one palm over my heart, appealing to the part of me that had been dead before her—and in moments like these I wished it would have remained that way.

Her eyes held mine. “Please, Luca, don’t punish Romero for protecting someone he loved. He and Lily belong together. I beg you.” Her hands trembled against me, and her eyes were pleading with me.

I knew I should refuse her request, but I hated the thought of losing Romero. He was one of the few people I trusted at all. I knew he’d take a bullet for me, and more importantly for Aria. But I also knew that he’d never be as unconditionally loyal as he’d been because now his feelings for Lily would always get in the way.

I pried Aria’s hands off my chest, and her expression fell. “I can’t base my decisions on feelings. I’m Capo and have to make decisions that benefit my Famiglia.”

Romero stepped up to me, ready to accept my verdict. He wouldn’t beg. His eyes held no judgment for the decision he expected of me: a death sentence.

I held his gaze for a long time, and made my choice.

“You are my best soldier. The Famiglia needs you, and I don’t trust anyone with Aria as I do you,” I said as I rested a hand on his shoulder, surprising myself as much as him. “War has been inevitable for a while. I won’t end your life to postpone it for a few fucking months. We’ll stand together.”

Romero relaxed. He didn’t say anything, but I could see that he’d try to make it up to me for the rest of his life. He was a loyal man, a soldier I didn’t want to lose.

“Of course, we might not get out of this house with our lives. We’re surrounded by the enemy now.”

“Most guests are either drunk or asleep. We could try to sneak out. They won’t notice Benito’s death until morning; by then we’ll be back in New York,” Romero said.

I doubted we’d be that lucky. Picking up my mobile, I tried to call Matteo. We needed to figure out a way to get out of Chicago, but he ignored my call. He was probably busy fucking his wife. “Damn it. Matteo isn’t picking up his fucking phone.”

“Do you think something happened to them?” Aria asked.

“The only thing happening is that he’s probably fucking your sister’s brains out right now and ignoring his fucking phone,” I said. Romero and I carried Brasci’s body into the bathroom before Liliana went in there to change out of her ripped wedding dress.

The moment Romero went in to help her, and Aria and I were alone, she came up to me and wrapped her arms around my waist, her cheek pressed against my chest. “Thank you, Luca. Thank you so much. I won’t forget this. I didn’t think it was possible but for what you did today, I love you even more.” She shook against me as she lifted her head, tears running down her cheeks. I brushed them away. Fuck me. This woman held more power over me than anyone ever had, than anyone ever would.

Romero returned and Aria stepped back. Public displays of affection were something I had to limit, even around Romero.

“Done,” Romero said.

“Good. Now let’s get going. I don’t want to risk staying here a moment longer than absolutely necessary.” I held out my hand for Aria. She took it with a tense smile and I pulled my gun. I needed to get her out of this house

alive no matter the cost. I opened the door and peered out into the corridor. It was deserted but the party was still going strong.

I signaled Romero that the coast was clear before I pushed the door open wider and stepped out, pulling Aria along.

We didn't cross anyone's path as we made our way to Matteo's room. I knocked but, of course, the asshole didn't open his door. He probably had his dick buried in Gianna's pussy. I knocked a bit harder. Again nobody reacted. Aria threw me a worried glance, and I rammed my fist against the wood as loud as I could risk. And finally Matteo opened his fucking door, only dressed in his boxers and sporting a fucking boner.

"Didn't you get the hint that I didn't want to be interrupted when I didn't answer your fucking call?" Matteo's gaze moved behind me, and his lips pulled into a grimace. "I have a fucking bad feeling."

I shoved him hard. "For fuck's sake, Matteo, pick up when I call you. You need to get dressed. We have to leave now."

"What's wrong?" Gianna asked, coming up behind Matteo in a satin bathrobe. Her lips were swollen as if she'd been busy giving Matteo head. "Shit, something bad happened, right? Did the asshole hurt you?" She hugged Lily. Aria's hand tensed in mine.

"He's dead," Liliana said.

"Good," Gianna said. She patted Romero's shoulder. "You did it, didn't you?"

Romero smiled tightly. "Yeah, which brings us to the reason why we need to hurry."

"Romero is right. We need to get out of this house before someone realizes that the groom is dead," I said, losing my fucking patience.

"I always thought that I'd be the one to start a war between the Outfit and the Famiglia. Kudos to you, Romero, for proving me wrong for once,"

Matteo said, grinning.

“I thought that too,” Romero said.

Everyone had thought that. Matteo was the crazy one. Romero had always been reliable, but Liliana had obviously changed that. I sighed. “I hate to interrupt your chitchat but we need to get the fuck going.”

Matteo and Gianna got dressed, and we left the room and continued our journey through the house. Every muscle in my body was tight with tension as I listened for the slightest sound of people crossing our path.

We took the second staircase in the back of the house down to the first floor and headed for the door that led to the underground garage. Most houses in this area had them because outside space was limited. There was the sound of steps from the corridor to the left of the door, and my body went into fight mode as I shielded Aria and raised my gun. Matteo and Romero did the same. Things had gone too smoothly until now, but that was over. Even with our silencers in place a shooting would create a certain amount of noise, especially if our attackers managed to cry out a warning. A bullet through the head was the only solution.

My finger on the trigger tightened when a blond boy turned the corner. Fuck. In the last moment, I stopped myself from shooting. His hair had saved him. It was Fabiano.

Aria gasped, her hand jerking in mine. She would have run to him, if I hadn’t held her in place. Fabiano’s eyes widened as he stumbled to a stop and pointed his own gun at us. He hadn’t been fully inducted yet, definitely hadn’t killed anyone yet, and he wasn’t good at hiding his emotions. Fear flashed across his face before suspicion took its place.

Aria pressed her palm against my arm, trying to force it down, but I kept my gun pointed at Fabiano. He was only a kid but a bullet from him was as deadly as from anyone else.

“What’s going on here?” Fabiano asked firmly, standing even taller than usual and trying to look like a man. With the gun and that serious expression, he almost managed to look like more than nearly a teenage boy.

“Put that gun down,” I ordered.

Fabiano laughed, but it sounded nervous and his eyes held fear. He would have to learn to hide it better if he wanted to survive in the Outfit—if he survived tonight. “No way. I want to know what’s going on.” His eyes moved from Aria to Gianna, then to Liliana.

“Why are you even running around with a gun? Shouldn’t you be in bed?” Aria asked and was about to take a step forward, but I pulled her back.

“I have guard duties,” Fabiano said with a hint of pride.

“But you aren’t inducted yet,” Lily said, confused.

“I started the induction process a few weeks ago. This is my first task,” Fabi said. The hand with his gun began shaking slightly. He would stand no chance against us, even if we didn’t have guns pointed at him. I would be at his side to knock him out in a heartbeat, and I preferred that scenario to killing him because of the woman at my side.

“Father gave it to you because he thought it would be an easy first job, right? Nothing bad ever happens at weddings,” Liliana said with a broken laugh.

“He gave me the job because he knew I was responsible and capable,” Fabiano said, squaring his shoulder. His eyes darted to me again, then to Matteo and Romero.

“You don’t really think you can kill all three of us, do you?” Matteo asked with a twisted grin.

Gianna shot him a glower. “Shut up, Matteo.”

“I can try,” Fabiano said. Aria’s fingers around my arm tightened, and her gaze was practically burning into me.

“Fabiano,” I said, trying to sound reasonable even though time was against us and I just wanted to get the fuck away. “They are your sisters. Do you really want to risk them getting hurt?”

“Why is Lily here? Why isn’t she with her husband? I want to know what’s going on. Why are you trying to take her with you? She’s part of the Outfit, not of New York.”

“I can’t stay here, Fabi. Do you remember how you told me I shouldn’t marry Benito? That it wasn’t right?” Liliana said.

“That was a long time ago, and you said yes to him today. Where is he anyway?”

Liliana looked at Romero with an expression even a twelve-year-old boy could understand.

“You killed him, didn’t you?” Fabiano hissed, and he raised his gun again. “Was this some kind of trick to weaken the Outfit? Father always said you’d stab us in the back one day.”

Aria tried to move toward him again, but I pushed her back with a glare.

She narrowed her eyes. “He’s my brother!”

“He’s a soldier of the Outfit.” Maybe she thought because I put her first, other Made Men would also forget that their first choice should always be the mafia.

“Fabi, the Famiglia didn’t try to weaken the Outfit. This isn’t about power. It’s all my fault. Benito tried to hurt me and I stabbed him. That’s why I need to leave. Father would punish me, maybe even kill me,” Liliana said in a soothing voice.

Fabiano took a step back. “You killed your husband?” Matteo gave me a look over Gianna’s head. He was waiting for me to give him the go to

shoot, and if it weren't for Aria's shaking body at my side, I wouldn't have hesitated.

"I didn't know what else to do."

Fabiano pointed at Romero. "What about you and him? I'm not stupid. There's something going on between you."

"We've been together for a while. You know I never wanted to marry Benito, but Father didn't give me a choice."

"So you want to leave Chicago and the Outfit for New York like Gianna and Aria," Fabiano said.

Liliana nodded. "I have to."

"You could come with us," Aria suggested. Her eyes found mine, begging.

I looked at Fabiano. "You could become part of the Famiglia." My family wouldn't like it, and I probably would have to kill a few to show strength.

Fabiano shook his head. "Father needs me. I'm part of the Outfit. I made an oath."

"If you're not fully inducted yet, it's not as binding," Matteo said. A fucking lie. Matteo and I would kill any initiate who decided to break off the induction, not to mention join the Outfit.

"I won't betray the Outfit."

I'd expected that answer. Fabiano had been brought up in the Outfit, brought up with the knowledge that one day he would follow in his father's footsteps. "Then you'll have to stop us from leaving. And we won't let you. There will be blood, and you will die."

Fabiano met my gaze. "I'm a good shot."

He was also terrified. "I believe you. But are you better than all three of us? Do you really want your sister Lily to be punished? If you force her to

stay, you sign her death warrant."

Conflict showed on his face. "If I let you leave, and someone finds out, they will kill me too. I could die an honest death if I tried to stop you."

"You could, and they would sing your praise, but you'd be dead all the same. Do you want to die today?" He was still young. Death held more terror for him than it did for us. He hadn't faced it often enough yet.

Fabiano lowered his gun a couple of inches. I doubted he noticed.

"Nobody has to find out that you let us leave. You could have tried to stop us but we were too many," Romero said.

"They will think I was scared and ran away, and that's why you escaped."

I gave Romero a sign. I could tell that we had Fabiano. "Not if you got wounded. We could shoot you in the arm. This was meant as an easy first job—nobody expects you to be capable of stopping the best fighters of New York. They won't hold it against you if you got shot."

Aria stared. "You want to shoot my brother?"

"What if you injure him seriously?" Lily asked.

"I could hit the zit on his chin if I wanted to; I think I can manage to hit an unproblematic spot on his arm," Matteo said. "And we're taking a risk by not killing him, so an arm wound is really nothing."

I ignored them and focused my attention on the boy. "So what do you say, Fabiano?"

There was conflict in his eyes but then he lowered his gun. "Okay. But I will have to call for help. I can't wait more than a few minutes or they'll get suspicious."

I kept my gun pointed at Fabiano, as did Romero and Matteo. "A few minutes should be enough for us to drive away. They will follow us once they figure out what's going on, but five minutes will bring enough distance

between us and them. Dante isn't someone who likes fighting in the open, so I doubt he'll send his men on a wild car chase. He'll attack us later, once he's figured out the best way to hurt us."

After we faked a shooting and Matteo shot Fabiano's arm, we sped off in our rental cars. Romero and Lily made up the front in their car, and the rest of us got into the other car. Matteo was behind the wheel, Gianna beside him, while Aria and I sat in the backseat. I glanced through the window and after a few minutes, three black Outfit cars began chasing us.

"Down," I ordered, and Aria complied at once, curling up on the seat, worry and fear on her face. I let down the window, preparing to shoot. So far Dante's men hadn't fired a single shot, probably because we were still in a residential area. Neither he nor I needed additional attention from the press or the police. The moment we passed into an industrial area, I held my gun out and began firing. Our window shattered and Aria let out a scream. I fired again and hit the shooter in the head. My next bullet tore through their tire, and the car spun out of control. The two other cars kept up their pursuit but eventually they slowed. Dante must have given the order for them to pull back. He would attack soon, after he'd made a plan where he could hurt us the most. Fuck.

When I was sure we wouldn't be attacked again, I lowered my gaze to where Aria was pressed against the seat. I brushed shards off her hair and shoulder, and she opened her eyes, peering up at me with trust. Trust that I would protect her, but damn it, doing that had become more difficult today.

"You can never return to Chicago," I said quietly as she sat up. "You will never see your brother again."

Her expression crumpled, and she pressed against me and buried her face in my neck. I held her as she cried. Matteo met my gaze through the rearview mirror. We both knew shit would hit the fan soon, and we'd have our hands full controlling our uncles and keeping the Outfit out of our territory.

Love. The root of weakness.

Fuck.

Aria raised her head again, those fucking baby blues drawing me in as they always did.

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chapter 14

ARIA

Luca was still tense around me, had been since he'd found out I'd known about Lily and Romero, and not told him. Since Dante Cavallaro had declared war on us because of it, Luca's mood hadn't improved.

He would never raise a hand to me or insult me, but he was colder than usual. He sought me out at night, still made love to me, but there was a barrier between us. I wasn't sure how to tear it down again.

After we returned to our penthouse after Lily and Romero's wedding, I pressed my hand against his chest over his heart, looking up into his guarded gray eyes. "Luca, I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Romero and Lily. Please don't be angry. I can't bear it. I need you. I love you. I only meant to protect Lily, not betray you."

His eyes softened marginally. "And I need to protect the Famiglia and you, but that will be more difficult now that we are at war with the Outfit. We have the Russians and the Outfit against us, and then there's the Camorra in Las Vegas. If they decide to attack us too, or heaven forbid cooperate with the Outfit, we'll be in trouble."

I shivered. "Is it a real possibility that will happen?"

"The Camorra isn't very strong at the moment, but that can change."

Since I started working the books for the Famiglia, I was more involved in the business, but Luca still made sure I only got to experience a very small part of the bad.

“But most of your men don’t blame you for breaking truce with the Outfit, right? They are loyal to you because you are strong and capable.”

Luca smiled darkly. “They want war, but they don’t like why Dante declared war on us. And that I made Romero Captain hasn’t been received well either. It’s mostly still only my uncles stirring up shit, but if my other Underbosses decide to side with them, I will have to go on a killing spree I’m really not looking forward to.”

I shivered. “Be careful.”

Six weeks since war had been declared; six weeks of nothing but silence from Chicago, from Fabi.

I worried about him, couldn’t stop myself from worrying. My mind was whirring as I decorated the Christmas tree in the huge living area of our mansion with Lily and Gianna. This year we’d spend most of the Christmas time in the Hamptons. Luca wanted us out of New York. Things were tense there right now because everyone feared retaliation from Dante and the Outfit.

It was still only the beginning of December, but I hoped the Christmas decorations would lift our spirits.

Gianna slanted a look at me. “You are very quiet.”

I sighed. “I’m worried about Fabi. Now that I can’t talk to Val anymore, we have no way of finding out how he’s doing.”

“Val said they believed his story and won’t punish him. He’ll be fine,” Gianna said firmly. I wondered if she really believed what she said.

“We don’t know that. That was more than a month ago. I hate that he’ll have to celebrate Christmas without us. In the past we could at least visit

him in Chicago, but this year he'll be all alone with Father and his new wife."

Father had never been kind to Fabi and now that he had a new wife, a young wife that could give birth to more heirs, I worried he'd be even less inclined to go gentle on my little brother.

"Fabi is on the verge of becoming inducted into the Outfit; celebrating Christmas without us is the least of his problems," Gianna said. She sounded so…blasé about the entire thing. Perhaps because Fabi was a boy. She thought men in our world were born with blood on their hands.

"He's still only a boy. And we couldn't even congratulate him on his birthday." He had turned thirteen a couple of weeks ago, and I hadn't been allowed to talk to him or send him a present. My heart ached just thinking about it.

Lily didn't say anything. She still blamed herself for everything. I knew she was happy as Romero's wife. It became obvious whenever she looked at him, but sometimes she tried to hide her happiness from us as if that would make our situation better.

Gianna shook her head. "Aria, you have to accept what you can't change. You have to stop—and I can't believe I'm actually saying it—you have to stop going against Luca's orders."

I blinked at her. "You say that? You ran, and I helped you."

"I know. But now I'm here married to Matteo, part of the Vitiello clan, and unlike you, I know exactly what kind of man my husband is. But you keep forgetting what Luca is."

"What is he?" I challenged, turning to face her with narrowed eyes. It had been a while since Gianna and I had had a fight, but we'd all been on edge these last few weeks.

"A Capo. A monster. A killer."

“So is Matteo,” I interrupted her. “And you keep ignoring his orders. You keep provoking him.”

“It’s a game between us, Aria. But Luca doesn’t play games. He is the Capo of the East. And because of you his territory is threatened. He will do anything to stay Capo. It’s in his blood. Ultimately if he has to choose between you and power, he will choose power.”

The air left my lungs. Angry tears gathered in my eyes. Lily stepped between us. “Hey, stop it.”

I sidestepped Lily and moved closer to Gianna, meeting her gaze straight on.

I heard the men enter, but I didn’t pay them any attention.

LUCA

“Dante will take his time before he’ll attack. He is a man of plans,” Matteo said again, as if I didn’t know that. The problem was I didn’t know when he’d attack. I could only hope Orazio as Dante’s brother-in-law would be involved in any plans from the very start and warn us soon enough.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, don’t look at me like that!” Gianna screamed.

My eyes found Aria and Gianna facing each other as if they were about to attack any moment.

“We can’t all be as selfish as you, Gianna,” Aria hissed.

Matteo shot me a look as if I knew what was going on. Usually they were inseparable. And I had never heard Aria talk to her sister like that.

Gianna laughed. “At least I’m not being stupid or suicidal.”

“No, suicidal—that’s not you. You always make sure to have your back covered even if it means others get hurt.”

Gianna paled. I wasn't sure if Aria was referring to Matteo's car crash or something else but whatever it was, she hit home. "At least I fought against this lifestyle, while you were happy being sold off to Luca like a fucking whore."

Silence.

Aria stormed off and I followed after her. Matteo would take care of his own wife. I found Aria in our bedroom, looking out of the window, body shaking. I put my hands down on her shoulders. "What's the matter with you and Gianna?"

"She's being a bitch," Aria said in a trembling voice.

"That's her natural disposition."

Aria let out a choked laugh and turned around to me. I ran my hands through her hair and she leaned in to the touch. "If anyone's a whore, it's her."

Aria pursed her lips. "She didn't mean it."

I chuckled. "Already back to defending her?"

Aria's eyes flickered with need and her hands slid down my chest to my belt. Her gaze locked on mine, she began unbuckling my belt. "I need you," she whispered. I didn't have to be told twice. I pulled her dress over her head as Aria fumbled with my pants. When my cock finally sprang free, I wrapped one arm around her back and gripped her thigh with the other, then hoisted her up. She gasped as I lowered her on my dick, her muscles tight around me. Propping her back up against the wall, I kissed her hard until she loosened around me before I began slamming into her.

I'd tried to stay angry at her for keeping Romero's affair with Lily from me, but I couldn't. The moment I saw her eyes so full of fucking love my own heart softened. Fuck, my dark, cruel heart always softened for that woman.

I lowered my mouth to her throat and bit down lightly, sucking the skin into my mouth, marking her. Mine. Always fucking mine.

Aria cried out as I hit her G-spot and my balls tightened at the sound. “Yes,” I growled before I sucked one of her nipples into my mouth. Aria arched up and I slammed even harder into her. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, as I fucked her against the wall.

“Luca!” she cried as her walls clamped down hard, her elegant neck bared to me again. I marked another spot and her spasm intensified, fingernails scratching my skin, and I came with a violent shudder. I pressed my forehead against the cool wall as Aria buried her face in the crook of my neck. Without pulling out of her, I carried her over to our bed and lowered us to the bed, me on top of her. She wrapped her arms tightly around me as if she was worried I’d disappear.

I kissed her, brows furrowing at the melancholy on her face, but then she opened her eyes and gave me a small smile. “Are we okay?”

I nodded, wondering why she was asking again. “I’m not angry at you, Aria. You can’t help who you are like I can’t help who I am.” She needed to help others, mostly her siblings. I got it. If she could accept my darkness, I could try to accept that occasionally she acted out of worry for her siblings. I didn’t like it though.

Aria pressed her face into my chest and sucked in a deep breath. She was being emotional, even by her standards. Maybe she’d picked up on my own worries. And things would only get worse. In three days I had a meeting with my Captains and Underbosses, and I had a feeling Uncle Gottardo would fire against me again. I wasn’t sure how much to share with Aria, and decided to keep information at a minimum for now, until she was back to her old self.

ARIA

Regret weighed heavily on my shoulders. Regret over having broken down in front of Luca at such a crucial time. He needed me to be strong for him. And regret over my fight with Gianna this morning. We hadn’t spoken since then, not even during dinner and it was starting to bother me, but I was too proud to make the first move.

Maybe I would try tomorrow after a night of sleep had calmed us down. Luca was in the shower. He would have to leave for New York early the next morning and probably wouldn’t be back for several days. He had a meeting with the Famiglia, that was all he’d share—because he worried about my emotionality.

Sighing, I reached for my anti-baby pill in the drawer, cringing when I realized I’d forgotten to take my pill yesterday—again. Over the last months I’d missed a few pills as well. I stilled with the packet in my hands, counting the days since my last period, but I couldn’t remember. I’d gone without my period before, in the months before my wedding to Luca, because my body didn’t tolerate stress and fear very well. Maybe it was the same this time.

My cell vibrated on my nightstand, and I lunged for it when I recognized the number. Bringing the phone to my ear, I quietly moved out of the bedroom and down the corridor to one of the empty guest bedrooms, where I locked myself in. “Fabi?”

“Aria,” Fabi said in a raspy voice. He sounded as if he was having trouble breathing and my heart clenched with fear.

“What’s wrong?”

Pause. “Nothing,” he got out. “Wanted to hear your voice.”

“Are you okay? You don’t sound good.”

“Father was mad today. He’s always mad since you all left,” Fabi said simply, and I could imagine what that meant.

I swallowed. “I can talk to Luca again and ask him to take you in.”

“No!” Fabi gasped. “That’s betrayal. I’m part of the Outfit. I shouldn’t be talking to you. We are enemies.”

I sucked in a breath. “*We’re not*.”

“I need to go.”

“Fabi?” There was silence on the other end. I stared down at the screen. Fabi had ended the call. I started trembling, opened the door and made my way back to our bedroom in a trance.

Luca was still in the bathroom when I stretched out on the bed. What could I do? Talking to Luca wouldn’t change anything. Luca had enough to deal with, especially with the upcoming meeting of the Famiglia. But could I keep this from him?

When Luca stepped out of the bathroom, looking exhausted and tense, I made my decision. I’d handle this on my own.

Luca gave me a lingering kiss before he left in the morning. The moment he was gone, I sat up and grabbed my laptop, checking flights to Chicago. I considered my options. I couldn’t be gone for long before someone noticed my disappearance. I would have to take the earliest available flight and return on a late plane the same day. Biting my lip, I hesitated. I couldn’t use Luca’s and my bank account. If he checked it, he would notice something was wrong.

My fingers shook as I made my decision. I had been the Famiglia's accountant for close to a year now, and I handled several of the bank accounts. *Betrayal.*

I only borrowed the money and would put it back as soon as possible. I quickly booked my flights with the account we used for the Sphere, then logged out. In two days I'd leave for Chicago and hopefully return with Fabi.

Now I only needed to figure out a way to get out of the premises of our mansion without anyone noticing. I went over to my walk-in closet and rummaged in the upper drawers until I found my brown wig. I'd need that to stay undetected in Chicago.

My pulse raced in my veins at what I was about to do. I'd found a way to bring Lily and Gianna to New York with me. Now I needed to save Fabi from our father before he managed to break my little brother.

I went downstairs and found Gianna and Lily sitting at the dining table. I didn't see Sandro anywhere, nor the new guards Luca had put in place on the premises in the last few weeks. Romero was thankfully in New York with Luca and Matteo, since this was his first official meeting as Captain.

I sat down, and Gianna and I said at the same time, "I'm sorry for what I said."

We looked at each other for a moment, then laughed. Lily let out a sigh of relief. Slowly, the smile slipped from my face.

Gianna grimaced. "Oh no. I don't like that look on your face."

"What's wrong?" Lily asked, putting down her cup of coffee.

I reached for an almond biscotto and poured myself some coffee, trying to gather my thoughts. As I was about to take a bite of the pastry, my stomach churned and I set it back down on my plate. I was too nervous to eat. I had a feeling I'd throw up if I tried to force down anything.

“Aria, spill it,” Gianna muttered. “You are up to something.”

“Fabi called me yesterday,” I whispered.

Lily jerked in her chair, eyes widening.

“He did?” Gianna asked in disbelief.

“Father is giving him a hard time. I think he’s beating Fabi worse than before.”

“That bastard. I thought being married to his child-bride would improve his mood.”

“It didn’t. It’s our fault that Fabi is left alone with our father. I have to try and bring him to New York with me.”

Gianna shook her head. “Don’t tell me you want to go to Chicago.”

“Aria,” Lily said imploringly. “It’s too dangerous. You are the Capo’s wife.”

“I know,” I said firmly. “But I also know that I will never forgive myself if I don’t check on Fabi and try to help him. He doesn’t deserve being left alone. I will fly to Chicago, and nothing you say will stop me.”

I paused. “Will you help me?”

Lily and Gianna exchanged a look.

“I helped you escape, Gianna, and I kept a secret for you, Lily. I think it’s not too much to ask for your help.”

“It’s not that we don’t want to help you, but we are worried,” Lily said quietly. “And we should go to Chicago together. I don’t think you should go alone. Fabi isn’t only your responsibility. He is our brother, too.”

“You know we can’t all disappear,” I said. “That will draw too much attention. It will be difficult enough to hide my disappearance and you know that.”

Gianna narrowed her eyes. “You already have a plan, don’t you?”

I nodded, and told them what I had in mind.

When I was done, Gianna shook her head. “That is either genius or insane, I can’t decide.”

“It’ll work, that’s all that matters.”

Lily worried her lower lip. “If you get caught, Luca will be furious.”

“And even if your plan works, how are you going to explain Fabi’s sudden appearance in New York?” Gianna asked.

“I will tell him Fabi ran away from Chicago and came here. Luca will take him in.”

Gianna got up and sank down in the chair beside me, taking my hands. “Aria. This isn’t a small thing you’re trying to do. The Famiglia is at war with the Outfit. Luca will lose his shit if he finds out you went to Chicago behind his back.”

“It’s not our war! Why are we supposed to stay away from our own brother only because Made Men decide they hate each other?”

Gianna snorted. “You realize that those are my words?”

“Gianna is right, though. Luca will be furious.”

“He won’t find out.” He could never find out. He’d be worried sick if he found out I went to enemy territory.

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chapter 15

ARIA

Luca was bound to the Famiglia in a way that I would never be. I was loyal to Luca, but he had to understand that loyalty wasn't the same as unquestioning obedience. Luca, Romero and Matteo were still busy in New York, and in the afternoon the meeting of the Famiglia would go down. That would keep everyone busy.

I had four guards to avoid. Three of them were in different spots in the garden, only one of them in the mansion with us. I got up at three in the morning, got dressed, packed my bag and slipped out of my room. Gianna and Lily were waiting for me in the dark corridor. "Ready?" I whispered.

Gianna made a noncommittal noise.

"Yes," Lily whispered. "I will pretend to have a nightmare and scream as loud as I can and when the guards come running, Gianna will barge in and act like a bitch and tell them to be silent because you aren't feeling well."

I knew we'd only get rid of two guards that way. One guard would remain near the water because that was the most vulnerable spot on the premises, since there were no gates to overcome. I could only hope that the others would be distracted enough for me to slip out. I had all the necessary safety codes because Luca trusted me.

I hugged my sisters before I moved through the house. One guard always sat in the open living area. I crouched down and waited for Lily's

scream. When it came, the first guard came running out of the living room and up the stairs as expected, and I used the moment to rush downstairs and slip into the east wing. Lily's screams died away when I entered the code into the lock at our back door and slipped out. I put on my wool cap and ran down the lawn, near the bushes toward the gates. The guard was gone from his spot. The gates were high, topped with barbwire and humming with electricity. It was the least likely spot for intruders to attack so the guards abandoned it first. Smiling, I keyed the second code into the system. The gate blinked once, and I slipped out then reactivated the lock.

These gates were supposed to keep people out, not lock us in. Yet, I'd have to ask Luca to up the protection around the perimeter once I was back in New York. Not wasting any time, I ran down the winding road until I reached the corner where I'd ordered the Uber driver to pick me up. When I spotted the car's spotlights, I could have laughed with relief. Gianna and Lily would handle the rest. The guards wouldn't check on me in my room unless prompted, and Luca had no reason to suspect anything, nor had anyone else. They trusted me.

I pushed my guilt aside.

The airplane was barely up in the air when nausea gripped me. I'd never reacted to flying that way. I quickly unbuckled my seat belt and rushed toward the bathroom. Throwing up in a narrow airplane toilet ranked high on my never-to-do list, but I couldn't keep my food inside. The moment I bent over the grayish-blue toilet my stomach ejected my breakfast. I quickly flushed and washed my hands and face.

I still felt wrong, and slowly a horrible realization crept up on me. I was still overdue for my period. Fabi's call had distracted me, but now it all came back. The missed pills, my nausea. I was almost two weeks overdue.

I sagged against the wall, trying to remember when that had happened last. In the first few years of me getting my period they had been very erratic, but since I'd started taking the pill shortly before my marriage to Luca that had changed. Two to three days, that still happened sometimes… but almost two weeks?

Things had been so stressful in the last few months because of Lily and Romero. How often had I forgotten to take the pill? I wasn't sure. I hadn't counted. I should have counted after my call with Fabi.

A few times definitely, but I had been too busy worrying about my sister, about Luca, my marriage and everything else to pay it much attention.

Perhaps I was drawing the wrong conclusions. It could be that I was coming down with the flu, or that my stomach was reacting to the stress.

Yes, that was it.

With a shaking hand, I slid open the door and returned to my seat. The stewardess sent me a concerned look, but I gave her a quick smile to show I was all right. I didn't want them to make an emergency landing because they thought I was seriously sick.

Back in my seat, I was overcome with worry. I couldn't stop wondering. What if I was pregnant? The last time Luca and I had discussed the matter he had been very adamant about not wanting children in the near future. Things were too dangerous to bring a baby into this world. But when would that ever change, especially now that Dante had declared war on us? This war was ridiculous.

It didn’t make sense to work myself up over nothing. Nausea didn’t mean I was pregnant. Once I returned to New York, I could take a pregnancy test and then I’d know more. Until then I needed to focus on the task at hand. I had to get in contact with Val, talk her into arranging a meeting with Fabiano and try to convince him to come with me to New York. The last thing I wouldn’t mention to Val, though.

It was strange to be back in Chicago. The city I’d grown up in felt no longer like my home, and not because there was war between the Famiglia and the Outfit. I wasn’t the same person I’d been more than four years ago when I’d left for New York.

Yet, despite the war, the city didn’t feel any different than it had during any other visit. Everything was peaceful. People were looking forward to the Christmas holidays.

My hair was hidden beneath my wig and a scarf was wrapped around the lower half of my face. Luckily the Chicago winter warranted that kind of outfit, so I wouldn’t catch attention. Even my thick wool coat didn’t keep the cold from biting at my skin.

I walked the streets freely, as I hadn’t in a long time. It was exhilarating to be this free. I’d gotten used to the golden cage that was my life. I loved Luca. I couldn’t live without him, but sometimes I wished I had more freedoms. I knew there were limits to what he could allow me. He had helped me go to college for a while, something very few men in his position had done, but ultimately he and I would always be limited by the rules of mob life.

This was the first time in forever that I didn't have a bodyguard trailing after me. I watched the passersby, wondering how they spent their days, how it felt to be free of the confines of the mafia I'd never been truly free, nor had my sisters, not even Gianna when she was on the run because it had always been that: running.

I'd never resented mob life as much as Gianna did, but sometimes I longed for moments of freedom. College had given me a taste, but it would always only be that—a short taste. I would never leave my world, not because Luca wouldn't allow it, though that was true as well, but because it was the only place I truly belonged. It was the world I knew.

I hoped Val hadn't changed her routine since the last time we talked on the phone. I had timed my entire plan around it.

I waited across from the restaurant where she met with Bibiana for brunch every Wednesday, cradling a coffee-to-go cup in my gloved hands in an attempt to stay warm despite the freezing temperatures. Relief washed over me when a black Mercedes limousine with tinted windows finally pulled up in front of the restaurant and Val got out, as tall and regal as always, her baby bump straining against her coat. She must have been in her ninth month. Would I look like that in eight months? I pushed the thought aside. This wasn't the time for daydreaming.

Val wasn't alone. She held the hand of a little girl, her three-year-old daughter, Anna. I couldn't help but smile, but it died when I realized that I wouldn't see her grow up despite being her godmother. Two bodyguards followed them into the restaurant. I knew their faces but not their names.

Checking the street for traffic, I quickly crossed over to the other side and headed inside the bistro-like restaurant. I didn't have a reservation but I hoped they'd be able to squeeze me in. I approached the waiter, taking my wool cap off and hoping my wig would hide my identity, but I had to lower

my scarf. I kept my back to the seating area. I knew Val's bodyguards would be watching me, because I had entered after them.

"For two?" the waiter asked, a good-looking man in his late twenties.

"Just me," I said then took off my coat, revealing a pair of dark denim jeans and a white blouse, so Val's bodyguards would see I was a small female *nobody* without weapons and mark me down as unimportant.

The waiter smiled. "Don't tell me you don't have someone who would take you out for brunch? A pretty lady like you shouldn't have to eat alone."

I blinked, taking a moment to realize he was flirting with me. In New York nobody ever did. Most people knew my face and even though officially Luca was just a businessman with a dubious background, everyone knew what he really was. Not to mention that I was never anywhere without bodyguards.

"There's no one," I said, realizing how long it had been since Luca and I had gone out for dinner. My heart tightened with regret. When I returned, I'd ask him to make a reservation at the Korean restaurant he'd taken me to for our very first date.

"Follow me. I have a table for you."

I risked a peek over my shoulder, but as I'd expected the bodyguards weren't paying me any attention anymore. They kept their eyes on Val and her daughter, only occasionally glancing toward a table with men in suits to their right. Made Men always regarded only men as a danger.

I took the seat the waiter offered me and smoothed down my wig, worried it might have shifted because of the wool hat I'd worn outside, but everything seemed to be in place. After I ordered a peppermint tea to soothe my stomach and an omelet with avocado and toast, I pretended to be busy checking my mobile while I risked the occasional glance toward Val. Bibiana joined her about five minutes after I'd sat down with her own

daughter. I still marveled at how healthy she looked since her husband had been killed.

The waiter brought me my tea and my food, but kept returning to ask how I was, and flirt more. It was a bit annoying since I had to focus on Val. I needed to gauge the perfect moment. I barely touched my food. I'd always loved avocado, but a small bite had increased my nausea, and only a large gulp of tea had stopped me from making a run for the restrooms.

Val and Bibiana were laughing about something, not paying attention to Anna for a moment, and then it came. Anna spilled a drink all over herself and began crying. I got up quickly and moved into the ladies' room. Once there I hid in a stall, waiting. My heart pounded in my chest as I listened to the sound of the door being opened and a moment later, steps. Heels.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Val crooned. I smiled at the love in her voice. Soon the crying of her daughter quieted. I flushed the toilet and Val fell silent. When I stepped out of the stall, she looked up from dabbing at her daughter's dress with a napkin. It took a second glance at my face to recognize me. Her eyes widened, and darted briefly to the stalls behind me, expecting that I wasn't alone. Did she think this was a trap?

Good God. I was her cousin.

"Hi Val," I said with a smile.

Slowly she relaxed and smiled in return, but then her brows drew together. "What are you doing here?"

Anna's forehead puckered in confusion. She was all Val. Brown hair, same facial features, except for Dante's pale blue eyes. How would Luca's and my child look? I touched my stomach, wondering, and realizing I would be happy if I found out I was pregnant.

Val followed my hand and I quickly snatched it away. She let go of her daughter and came toward me and pulled me into a hug, but her belly made

it difficult. When she pulled back, her eyes were warm. “It’s good to see you again, but you shouldn’t be here. It’s too dangerous.”

“Aunt Aria?” Anna said in her high voice, finally recognizing me despite my wig.

Val turned quickly and put a finger against her lips. “Shh, Anna. Nobody can know Aria is here, okay? She’s playing hide and seek, and we don’t want her to get caught, right?”

“Right,” Anna said with a quick nod as she came toward me. I got down to her eye level and hugged her. “You are getting bigger every day.”

“I’ll be a big sister soon,” she said proudly.

“I know. I’m sure you’ll be a great big sister.” She nodded with even more enthusiasm.

A knock sounded and a deep male voice followed. “Mrs. Cavallaro, everything okay in there?”

“Yes, give me another moment, Enzo. I needed to take off my sweater to clean it. Anna got it dirty as well.”

I grinned, knowing what she’d done. Her bodyguard wouldn’t enter if there was the risk of seeing Dante’s wife half-naked.

When Val turned back to face me, I sobered. “I came to see Fabiano, Val. That’s the only reason why I’m here.”

She gave me an apologetic look. “We don’t have much time until Enzo will get suspicious.”

“I know. How about we meet this evening?”

“It will be difficult to shake off my bodyguards. Since I’m pregnant again, and since war’s been declared, Dante is more cautious.” After a moment, she gave me a resolute look. “But I’m sure I can up with something.”

I nodded. “Can you arrange for Fabi to be there as well?”

Enzo knocked again. “Mrs. Cavallaro?”

Val rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’ll be out in a moment!” She paused. “Aria, I’m not sure I can bring him, but I will see what I can do. Let’s say five p.m. in the Santa Fe?” Val splashed water on her blouse.

“I will be there.”

I gave her and Anna another hug before I slipped back into the stall, and a moment later I heard Val and Anna leave the room. I waited a few minutes until another customer came in before I left the restrooms and returned to my table. Val was talking to Bibiana as if nothing had happened. She had become a good actress in her marriage, but so had I. I paid and left the restaurant before Val’s bodyguards recognized me after all. Chicago’s cold gripped me as I walked the streets. I knew where I wanted to go, to my old home, to see if Fabiano was there, but that was a risk I couldn’t take. If Father recognized me, he’d hand me over without a second thought.

I’d have to find a café where I could wait until my meeting with Val later, but first I’d buy a knife just to be safe.

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chapter 16

ARIA

I arrived at the Santa Fe thirty minutes early and chose a booth at the window so I could keep an eye on the street. I trusted Val but I wasn't stupid. She was my friend, but more than that she was Dante's wife. I didn't think she'd tell him about our meeting, but I preferred to be extra cautious.

The waiter brought me a tea. I could tell he thought it strange that I was drinking peppermint tea for dinner, but it was the only thing I could stomach at the moment. I'd been half tempted to head into a pharmacy and buy a pregnancy test as I'd waited for the meeting but had decided against it.

A pregnant woman in a long black coat caught my attention as she got out of a taxi. She hurried toward the restaurant and a moment later Val appeared inside without Fabiano, but I had feared that would be the case. She spotted me and gestured to the waiter that she would join me.

Val slid into the booth across from me. "Aria," she said with a soft smile, but I could tell that she was tense.

She hadn't brought her daughter. Of course not. This wasn't our war but we were part of it. The waiter came over and took her order before he left again.

"Anna is so beautiful, Val. I will miss her terribly," I told her. "When will your son be due?"

“In about three weeks if he decides to be on time,” she said with a smile. “What about you and Luca, do you want children?”

I looked away and without thinking about it, my hand went to my stomach. “I do. But Luca won’t bring children into a war.”

She nodded but there was a knowing look in her eyes. “That’s why Dante didn’t want a second child, but there is never a good time to bring children into our world. Our men are sometimes so wrapped up in drug wars and power plays that they forget what really matters.”

“Family,” I finished, and she nodded. We looked at each other. This was already more information than our husbands probably wanted us to share. Val was supposed to be my enemy.

As if she remembered that too, her expression tightened. “Why are you here, Aria?”

“I told you, because of Fabi. I’m worried about him. It’s Christmas and he’s alone.”

Val didn’t contradict me, because she knew my father.

“How is he doing?” I asked worriedly, remembering my last call with him, which still tore at my heart.

Val gave a small shrug. “He’s still in the induction process. He seems fine, physically, from what I can tell.”

Clothes could cover a lot of things—we both knew that.

“Do you think there’s any way I can see him?”

Her eyes flickered with uncertainty. “He’s part of the Outfit. I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

Her loyalties lay with Dante and yet she was here, but her friendship to me had limits. “But he’s also my brother, my blood, Val. I practically raised him until I had to leave for New York. I want to protect him like a mother would her child.” I wasn’t sure if that was true, since I didn’t have children

yet, but I knew Val would understand. She touched her round belly, her dark brows pulled together.

“This war is so unnecessary,” she murmured.

“Our husbands would disagree. Or is there any way you could convince Dante to return to the truce?”

Val sighed. “Pride and honor. They will stop both Luca and Dante from forging another truce. We both know they never liked each other much.”

“I wish that weren’t true,” I said quietly. My eyes were drawn to the entrance because the door opened.

I froze when I registered the tall man who entered the restaurant. Blond hair, cold eyes, dressed in a gray three-piece suit.

Val followed my gaze and she paled. “I didn’t tell him anything, Aria. I would never—”

He stopped beside our booth. Dante Cavallaro.

“She didn’t,” he confirmed in a dangerous voice that sent a shiver down my spine. He leveled his cold blue eyes on Val. “But in a time like this, I won’t let you go anywhere without my knowledge.”

“You tracked me,” she said, staring down at her mobile lying flat on the table.

“That, yes, and Enzo recognized a familiar face this morning during your brunch with Bibiana but he wasn’t sure, and when he sent me a photo of Aria and I told him to grab her, she had already disappeared.”

Enzo had managed to take a photo of me? God, I was an idiot. Dante startled me when he slid into my booth, not Val’s. I was forced to scoot to the side to give him room to sit down. That way he was barring my escape route. My heart rate doubled.

Val’s eyes widened, and worry filled her face. Worry for me.

“Dante,” she said in a placating voice.

“Go outside. Two of my men are waiting for you. They will take you home.”

“Dante,” she tried again.

“Valentina,” he said sharply, and the look he sent her made me shiver. I rested my shaking hands in my lap.

She rose slowly, eyes apologetic as they settled on me.

“Thank you, Val, for coming here,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm but failing miserably.

She nodded, then turned and left.

Dante angled his body toward me. I met his gaze, trying to hide that he scared me but despite how good of an actress I had become, I knew he could see right through me. His own face gave nothing away. Could I hope for mercy? For compassion? But I knew the answer to that question. Dante ruled over the Outfit. He was like Luca in so many regards.

“I will call the waiter over now and pay for dinner. We will get up together, you will stay at my side, and we will go to my car and you will get in,” he said in an emotionless voice, his eyes holding a clear warning.

I swallowed, and nodded. Because it was all I could do. It wasn’t as if I really had a choice. I forced a smile when the waiter came over. Dante paid and got up. He picked up my coat that I had thrown over the backrest and held it out for me, his face a mask of politeness. His eyes told a different story.

I stood and let him help me into my coat. I trembled when his hands touched my shoulders and he leaned closer, his mouth next to my ear. “Don’t try to run or do anything stupid, Aria. I’d hate having to hurt you.”

I gave another jerky nod and he let go of my shoulders, then he grabbed my hand. I tensed even more but followed him outside and toward his Mercedes. He opened the passenger door for me, his gaze searching our

surroundings as I slipped in. When he shut the door, I drew in a shaky breath. My heart was beating frantically in my chest. We were at war. War.

And I was the wife of the Capo, and had let myself get captured by the Outfit.

Don't panic.

Chicago was my home once. Dante's known me all my life.

Dante wasn't known for hurting women, but what if he used me as leverage? A strong wave of nausea washed over me, and it took all of my willpower to force it down.

Dante got behind the steering wheel and pulled the car onto the street. "I assume you are alone." He was focused on traffic but I knew he was aware of my every move.

"I am," I said.

"You shouldn't have come to Chicago," he said as he checked the rearview mirror as if he expected someone to follow us. I feared he was right. Luca had been right. I acted without thinking when my siblings were concerned.

Eventually, Dante swerved the car to the side, startling me, and hit the brakes. We were in a deserted area near tracks. He didn't say anything. I closed my eyes. This was a place where nobody would hear me scream, a place where bodies could be disposed of.

My fingers on my knees tightened as I remembered the knife, which I'd bought this afternoon, in my bag. A bag that was between my feet in the legroom. But for me to get to it I would have to lean down and unzip the purse. And for me to get out of this car alive after pulling a knife on Dante, I'd need a miracle.

I opened my eyes, glancing down at my bag. Luca and I had practiced self-defense over the years and against an inexperienced man I could have

defended myself, but Dante was the Boss. He could kill without breaking a sweat.

And then Dante was leaning over me, tall and terrifying, and his arm brushed my thigh and I flinched away from him, my head colliding with the window. “No,” I gasped.

Dante’s blue eyes met mine, understanding reflecting on his face but he didn’t immediately pull away, still too close as if he was waiting for something. Then he straightened, holding my purse in his hand. He’d reached for it between my legs. I released a breath and quickly wiped a traitorous tear from my face, hoping my emotional reaction wasn’t because I was pregnant. What if I was risking this baby? God, what had I done?

Dante opened my bag, took out the knife and put it into the side compartment, then put the bag back down into the legroom.

I was still pressed against the window, my pulse racing.

“Aria,” Dante said firmly, drawing my gaze up to his eyes. They weren’t exactly soft, but at least they had lost some of the menace. “You are Luca’s wife; a war won’t change that. And even if you weren’t his wife, you wouldn’t have to fear *that* from me, or from anyone else in Chicago. I swear it.”

“Thank you, Dante,” I whispered. I straightened in my seat, embarrassed by my actions.

“There’s no need to thank me for respecting your body,” he said.

“What will you do with me then?”

He regarded me without a flicker of emotion. “That is the question, I suppose. I should use you to punish Luca and the Famiglia.”

I shivered.

“Or at the very least use you as leverage to blackmail him.”

That was what I feared. “Luca is Capo. He won’t risk the Famiglia.”

Dante smiled coldly. “But you are his wife, and I saw the way he looks at you. There’s only one thing Luca would risk his position as Capo over, and that’s you.”

Oh God, if Luca lost his territory or the trust of his men because of me, he’d never forgive me.

“I think you are overestimating my worth. Luca’s first choice will always be the Famiglia.”

Dante tilted his head, regarding me like an asset. “And I think you are underestimating your worth for good reason.”

“I’m not. Luca won’t risk his territory. You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“And that’s the problem,” he said. “If Luca didn’t comply with our requests, I’d have to try to convince him.”

“By hurting me,” I said.

He nodded. “By hurting you. I’m not very fond of inflicting pain on women.” But he would have to. “Yet, the Outfit is where my concern lies.” He said it like he had made his choice.

“There’s still Matteo, and the rest of the Famiglia. Luca has to consider their wishes.”

“Luca knows how to make people see things how he wants them to see them. Luca is the strongest Capo New York has seen in a long time. His men look up to him, but they don’t know his weakness.”

I was his weakness.

Tears burned my eyes. I had never meant to turn Luca weak, and I had to make sure he didn’t appear that way in front of his enemies, because that’s what Dante was. I took a deep breath. “Luca will do anything to stay Capo. It’s in his blood. Ultimately if he has to choose between me and

power, he will choose power, believe me." I met Dante's cold gaze and hoped he couldn't see that my words were a lie.

Dante didn't say anything for a while, only stared at me. "Perhaps. But perhaps you are only trying to save yourself and Luca. Perhaps you realize that you being here could mean the end of the Famiglia."

"No matter what you do to me, Luca won't give up his territory. Luca won't bow down to anyone."

"But he won't stand back and have you tortured."

I jerked in my seat, shock widening my eyes before I could mask it, and Dante's lips curled into a knowing smile.

Damn the mafia. Damn Dante and his manipulation. I forced down my panic and said firmly, "He won't. He will attack Chicago and kill every man. He will show strength, not weakness. Luca is the most ruthless man I know, Dante, and I've grown up knowing *you*. Don't mistake his possessiveness for anything else. I'm his possession, and he will tear down your city and your home to get it back." I had to force out every word past the lump in my throat, through my fear. I had to be strong for Luca, couldn't allow Dante to use me against him. I would do anything for Luca.

Dante leaned forward, his eyes hard. "And I will do the same with New York. You grew up seeing my civilized mask, Aria. Don't mistake it for my true nature. Luca carries his monster on the outside; I keep mine buried until I need it."

I didn't doubt it. Luca would attack and Dante would retaliate. People would die. Maybe my sisters, maybe Fabi. Maybe Luca. And I could not allow it. I went through my options. I could try to kill myself, but then Luca would definitely burn down Chicago. I could try to beg Dante to spare me because I was a woman, but his unrelenting expression gave me little hope. Trying to seduce him was completely out of the question, not that he struck

me as a man who would let his base instincts overrule logic, and there was Val. Not that I would ever kiss anyone but Luca. God, I was starting to lose my mind. My stomach twisted and my nausea crashed down on me so hard I reached for the door to get out but it was locked, of course.

“Aria,” Dante said in warning.

“I’m going to be sick,” I gasped out, and one look at my face and he unlocked the car. I stumbled out and ran to the back of the car, then bent over and threw up my tea and the muffin I’d had in the afternoon. I supported myself on the trunk of the Mercedes, trying to catch my breath. Dante’s gray trouser legs appeared in my peripheral vision, but I wasn’t even embarrassed. I was past that point. Tears slid down my cheeks as I clung to the car.

“Here,” Dante said quietly, holding out a tissue.

I took it with a mumbled “thanks,” then wiped my mouth. Bracing myself, I raised my head and met Dante’s gaze. He was frowning. “Is this fear or something else?” he asked.

I stared into his blue eyes. Dante was a father and Val was pregnant again. I had to trust that it would save me. I decided to go for the unflinching truth. “Both. I’ve never been more scared of you than I am today.”

Dante’s expression didn’t change, but that didn’t mean my words didn’t have a tiny effect on him. I needed to hope they did.

“But that’s not it,” I said, then hesitated. Either admitting to a pregnancy would save Luca and me, or condemn him and the Famiglia. “I am pregnant.”

Dante’s eyes flew down to my stomach. “You are pregnant with Luca’s child?”

I wasn’t sure, but everything pointed toward it. I straightened despite my nausea and dizziness. “Yes.”

“I hope you understand that I can’t take your word on the matter,” Dante said in a hard voice.

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I want proof.”

“Proof?” I echoed. “And what if my words are proven true?”

“That’s for me to decide then.” Dante’s face was an impenetrable mask. “Get back into the car, Aria.”

Dante took me to a pharmacy but I had to stay in the locked car as he bought a pregnancy test. I was starting to think that I’d had made a huge mistake by telling Dante I was pregnant. If the test proved I was pregnant, he’d have even more leverage against Luca, and if the test proved I’d lied, he’d be less inclined to spare me in any way. Sometimes I thought I could play these power games because I’d seen Luca and Matteo play them, but our men had years of experience on us.

I closed my eyes and pressed my palm against my still flat stomach, not sure what I should hope for. I opened my eyes when the door opened and Dante got in. His eyes went down to my hand on my stomach and I pulled it away.

He held out the packet and closed the door.

“Where am I supposed to take the test?”

“I can’t take you anywhere public. I’d loathe encountering someone who recognizes you.”

Because it would force his hand.

He pulled away from the curb and drove us back to an abandoned parking lot near the water.

“Here?” I asked.

“Here. I can’t take your modesty into consideration.” He left the car and I followed. I looked around, shivering.

“Hide behind the trunk; I will wait here. If you do anything to raise my suspicions, I will watch you, understood?” Dante narrowed his eyes at me and I gave a terse nod, then I walked around to the back and unzipped my jeans. Dante turned his back to me and I pulled down my jeans and panties before I crouched down and awkwardly held the test stick between my legs. It took a while before I could relax enough to let go, but Dante didn’t say anything.

I straightened and set the test down on the trunk then got dressed. “Done,” I said.

Dante turned, reached into his car, then walked toward me, and held out wipes.

“You are prepared,” I said with a bitter laugh.

“Usually it’s blood I’m cleaning off with them.”

I searched his face. Was he trying to intimidate me or only being honest? I couldn’t tell, didn’t know him well enough for that.

We waited the remaining time in silence until Dante nodded. I reached for the test with trembling fingers and opened the cap.

I stared down at the test and began crying.

Pregnant.

Dante watched me silently. I showed the test to him, but he knew. More silence followed.

“Luca doesn’t know,” Dante said.

I nodded in confirmation. I gripped the edge of the car. I was pregnant with Luca's child. A baby. I stared down at myself, and terror unlike anything I'd ever known took hold of me. I had come to Chicago, to enemy territory, with Luca's baby in me. I was so stupid, so very stupid.

"Aria." Dante's voice was softer than it had been all evening and I looked back up at him, and for several moments neither of us moved. I wasn't sure what to do.

"I know you must think of the Outfit," I whispered, but he silenced me with his raised palm.

"I will let you go. Luca is my enemy. I don't think that will change anytime soon, but you are an innocent woman, and you carry his child. I hope he'd do the same if Valentina ever fell into his hands, which she won't." Fierceness flashed in his eyes. Protective like Luca. Valentina was Dante's weakness like I was Luca's.

I wasn't sure what Luca would have done if he were in Dante's position. I wanted to believe that he would have made the same choice.

"But Aria make no mistake: if I ever run across Luca, I will kill him, and it won't be quick."

I shuddered because I believed him.

"You won't tell Luca about this," he said, an order.

"I won't, believe me." If Luca found out about this, he'd lose his mind.

He gave a terse nod.

I took a small step toward him. "Thank you, Dante. Thank you so much."

Another sharp nod. "Do you have a plane ticket?"

"Yeah, my plane leaves in three hours."

"I'll take you to the airport."

We got back into the car and again my hand found my stomach, still not able to believe that there was a small human growing inside of me. The result of Luca's and my love.

Dante was tense beside me as he drove me toward the airport. He stopped in front of the departure terminal then turned to me, and a predatory expression took over his face. "Don't ever return to Chicago, Aria. This once I'm doing this, but next time I will do what's necessary to ensure the Outfit wins this war."

"Can't there be peace again? For your children and ours. For Fabi and all the others who will suffer in this war."

Dante smiled coldly. "If Luca hands over Romero and Liliana, and if Luca apologizes, then perhaps there can be peace."

Luca would do neither and we both knew it. Two men who hated each other, and more men eager to tear into each other pulled us all into darkness, children and women alike, and my child would be born into this dark world.

Born in Blood. Sworn in Blood. I enter alive and leave dead.

"Leave," Dante said, and I did. I never looked back as I headed into the airport. I would never see Chicago again, never see Fabi again. I pressed my palm against my stomach, seeking consolation. I had to trust that Fabi was strong enough to survive in the Outfit. I could not risk anything again, not with a baby growing inside of me, not if I wanted to protect Luca and our family.

As I boarded the plane I wondered again if Luca would have done the same. Would he have let Val walk away?

LUCA

My control was hanging on a thread as I listened to my men. Matteo, too, looked like he had every intention of relieving our uncles of the burden of life.

Uncle Gottardo and Uncle Ermano seemed to be in a silent argument but I bet they were making plans to overthrow me behind closed doors. Ermano was a coward, and Gottardo was only marginally better, but eventually they would act. Perhaps Gottardo would send his remaining legitimate son to kill me.

“War was inevitable,” I growled. “You know that as well as I do. Don’t pretend you haven’t all been waiting for a chance to spill Outfit blood again.” My Underbosses nodded and so did most of my Captains. Not Gottardo and Ermano though.

My eyes went up to the high ceiling of the power station. I’d chosen it for every meeting of my Captains and Underbosses in the last three years to remind them of my bloody statement. I had a feeling their memory needed refreshing.

Gottardo rammed his fist down on the table, bringing my gaze back down to him, and shoved Ermano’s pacifying hand away. “Enough,” he muttered. “You risked too much bringing the youngest Scuderi girl here and making him Captain.” Gottardo nodded toward Romero with a condescending snort.

Romero tensed in his chair but Gottardo turned back to me.

“All because you let the blonde Scuderi whore lead you around by your dick.”

I shoved the massive table away and grabbed my uncle by the throat, lifting him from his chair and throwing it over. I thrust him against the wall and clamped both my hands down on his neck and squeezed as hard as I

could. His head turned red, eyes bulging. He clawed at me, beat and scratched, but I didn't loosen my grip. Nobody dared coming to his aid as he fought for his life.

I stared into his eyes as I had done many years ago when I'd killed his son. His bones gave in, pierced his carotid and esophagus. He choked, blood spurting out of his lips. He coughed, choked on his own fucking blood. Blood hit my face and shirt as he wheezed. I didn't ease up until the light left his fucking eyes, then I unfastened my grip and let his corpse drop to the ground at my feet. It had become dead quiet around me. I faced my men. My hands, face and shirt were covered in blood, and from the look on Matteo's face—shock and sick fascination—I knew I was a sight straight out of Hell.

"I am your Capo. I rule over the East Coast. I rule over you. If someone's got a problem with me, then step up and tell me to my fucking face, and I'll grant you a fucking quick death. But I swear by Heaven and Hell that crushing my uncle's throat will look like a merciful end to the next fucker who dares to insult my wife. I won't stand any kind of disrespect."

Many men nodded in agreement; others looked like they had shit their pants. I didn't give a fuck. "This meeting is over."

I waved toward my uncle's men then pointed at his remaining son, who didn't look particularly sad about his father's demise. "Take his corpse back home with you. I hope you won't share your brother's and father's fate one day."

I turned, fucking done with this meeting. Matteo was close behind me as I stalked out of the power plant and toward my Aston Martin.

Matteo stepped in front of me before I could get behind the wheel. "I think I should drive. You aren't quite sane right now."

I shoved the keys at him. "You think?" I muttered.

He headed back to the trunk, returned a moment later and held out a clean white shirt. “Perhaps you should change. I don’t want to have to explain this to the police if they catch us. Not all of them are on our payroll, remember?”

I pulled off my shirt and wiped my face and hands clean with it, but the pink tinge remained. Romero came out after us and I handed him the shirt. “Can you burn this?”

He nodded, eyes worried as he took my shirt. I didn’t need their fucking worry. I was fine.

I got into the car and Matteo got behind the wheel. We drove in silence but he kept looking my way. “You okay?”

I scowled. “I’ve killed so many people. You think I still care?”

“The last time you crushed a throat, you were a bit unhinged afterwards. You’ve been on edge anyway considering everything that’s been going on.”

On edge was a strange way to put it. Ever since war had broken out, the voices in the Famiglia that wanted me gone had grown louder. They were still a small minority but it made my life difficult. Perhaps tonight had silenced a few enemies, or perhaps I’d earned myself new ones. It was difficult to say yet. I’d have to replace my uncles with more trustworthy, younger Underbosses. I had tolerated them for long enough. It was time for them to retire before I had to kill another one.

“Back to our wives? Or do you need additional time to cool off?” Matteo asked.

“I don’t need time to cool off. I’m fine. All I want is to have Aria’s naked body beneath me.”

Matteo slanted me another look. I hardly ever mentioned sex with Aria. I hated to share even that tiny bit of Aria with anyone. We spent the rest of the drive in silence. Usually my pulse slowed quickly after the kill, but this

time it didn’t. When we pulled up in the driveway of the mansion, I was still wired. Romero arrived shortly after and together we entered our home. It was quiet as we moved into the living room. The women had put up the remaining Christmas decorations. The Christmas tree glowed in red and silver. I needed a peaceful Christmas, couldn’t wait for a few days of quiet with my true family.

My mobile beeped, announcing an email. I took it out of my back pocket. It was from a journalist contact and the subject line read “Urgent” followed by about a dozen exclamation marks. I paused and clicked on the email.

I got this from a colleague in Chicago and stopped it from making the rounds or worse, headline.

I clicked on the three attached photos.

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chapter 17

MATTEO

I had always suspected there was a point for both Luca and me when the darkness in us would rise too high, so high it would spill over and drown out all the light, all the good that remained. I feared this was the moment for Luca.

I stopped Romero from moving closer to Luca with a hand against his chest. Romero frowned, but then he looked at Luca and tensed. I, too, was frozen with apprehension.

Luca and I had spent all our lives together, had gone through the bad and the worse, had killed and suffered, had laughed and fought. I had never been truly wary of my brother. Not when he'd crushed our cousin's throat, not when he'd threatened me for talking shit about Aria, but until now I'd never seen that look on his face.

I wasn't sure what had him looking that way, but I knew only one thing that had the power to bring him to his knees, only one thing that could destroy Luca, that could make him snap once and for all. It was the one person I'd thought would stop him from snapping in the first place.

"Luca?" I asked carefully.

He stared down at a photo on his screen. I moved closer and what I saw made the blood drain from my face. It was a photo of Aria holding hands with Dante. It took me a moment to comprehend what I was seeing. It

didn’t even make sense. Romero, too, threw a glance at the photo then frowned.

Gianna, of course, chose that moment to saunter into the living room in nothing but a nightgown, but stopped when she saw us. Her eyes darted from me to Luca and the smile slipped off her face.

“Where’s Aria?” I asked her sharply.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” she muttered, her eyes darting to Luca once more, who still hadn’t moved a muscle and who was still staring down at his phone, but I knew he was listening.

“Gianna, where the fuck is Aria? This is serious,” I snarled.

Lily appeared behind her, but Romero shook his head and gestured at her not to come closer. “Where?” he asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said quietly, but it was a lie. Romero knew it. I knew it. Luca knew it.

“Is she in Chicago?” I asked.

Gianna and Lily exchanged a glance but remained silent.

“What’s going on here?” Gianna asked.

And Luca raised his eyes from the phone.

“Fuck,” I muttered because that look in his eyes…it scared me shitless.

“Lily,” Romero began, but he didn’t get to finish whatever warning he’d wanted to voice.

“Did you know about this?” Luca asked in a voice I’d never heard from him. Low, dark, on the verge of breaking. He turned his phone so Gianna and Lily saw the photo of Aria holding hands with Dante, then he clicked to the next photo showing Dante with his hands on Aria’s shoulder, his mouth at her ear in an intimate gesture. And the next, the worst: Aria in a car with Dante and he was leaning over her, his back to the camera, hiding most of

her body from view. You couldn’t see their faces, but they were close and his arm reached between her legs.

Lily sucked in a breath, and somehow it was the last straw. Luca roared and flung the phone away. It shattered against the wall. Next he gripped the Christmas tree and threw it to the ground. I grabbed Gianna’s arm and shoved her toward the entrance door. “Leave! Go to the car and wait for me.”

Gianna refused to leave, unlike Lily, who had allowed Romero to lead her outside. “Luca, stop being an idiot. Aria would never cheat on you, you stupid asshole!” Gianna shouted.

Luca had pulled a knife and was staring down at the blade, his chest and shoulders heaving, his face a mask of acute agony. Never had I seen him like that. Not even when our father had tortured us with knives, lighters and needles.

I gripped Gianna’s arm and pulled her out of the house and toward my Porsche, not caring that she was barefoot. She tried to shake me off. “Stop it, Matteo. He’s getting it wrong!” she shrieked.

I didn’t listen. I needed to get her to safety and then return to Luca and try to keep him from falling apart in a scary serial killer kind of way. I pushed her into the car, then locked the doors. Gianna hammered against the windows.

Romero had locked Lily in his Jeep, and gave me a worried look. “Aria wouldn’t cheat,” he said.

“You sure about that?” I muttered.

“You have to calm him down before he does something that can’t be undone,” Romero said.

I nodded. “Leave.”

“I’ll take a room in a hotel close by. Call me if you need me.”

Gianna started honking, driving me insane, but I wouldn't let her out of the car. I didn't want her anywhere near Luca when he was in that kind of mood.

With a deep breath, I returned to the mansion. Luca still held the knife in his right hand but in his left hand he held his iPad, that agonized look lingering on his face.

"Luca?" I ventured. He didn't react. I moved closer. He had opened the photos on the iPad as if seeing them in a bigger format would make them less real.

"You had a lot of shit thrown your way today. Perhaps you should try to calm down before you act on your anger."

Luca put down the iPad on the living room table and went to the liquor cabinet. If he didn't drop that fucking knife soon, I might consider getting my own out. He grabbed a bottle of whisky, opened it with his teeth, spit out the screw cap and took a deep swig. Alcohol wouldn't make him any less dangerous.

"Leave," he rasped.

"Luca, you love Aria."

Luca staggered toward me, and I had to fight the urge to draw a weapon. "Love!" He glared. "You might be okay with Gianna fucking around behind your back, but I can't…I can't fucking bear the thought of Aria…" His voice broke and fury contorted his face. Gianna hadn't fucked around, but it was futile to argue with Luca, and I definitely wouldn't let him ignite my own anger.

"Leave!" he roared. "Go to your wife and let me handle my own!"

I nodded, and took a step back. "Luca, some things can't be undone," I repeated what Romero had told me.

Luca turned his back to me, shoulders shaking with anger and worse—heartbreak. The former he could handle, but the latter he'd never had to deal with before.

But I couldn't interfere, not without risking a fight with Luca, and today one of us would die. I might be willing to die for Gianna and even for Luca, but not for Aria, not when she might have cheated on my brother. I backed away, my chest fucking tight. I wasn't sure if I'd see Luca again, not the Luca I knew, because if he hurt Aria, he wouldn't recover. I wasn't sure he would recover either way.

Gianna clutched my shirt when I slipped behind the wheel. "Matteo, you bastard, let me go to Luca!"

"No," I hissed. Luca hardly tolerated Gianna on the best of days, and today was the worst I'd ever seen him—and I had been with him at every bad and worse moment in his life.

"Then let me call Aria. I need to warn her. Luca has lost his mind. He will kill her if he thinks she cheated on him. He's a possessive asshole."

Luca wouldn't kill Aria because he was a possessive asshole. He'd kill her because she'd made him love and trust her, and had fucking betrayed him, had broken his fucking heart. I started the car but Gianna shoved my arm. "Matteo, damn it!"

"They will have to settle this."

"Settle this? The only way Luca will settle this is with his fucking knife. Matteo, I swear, if you let your brother hurt Aria, we're done."

Tears shone in her eyes but I wouldn't interfere. "For me to stop Luca, I'd have to disable him and for me to succeed, I'd have to kill him. And that's not something you can ask of me, Gianna. Not when your sister brought this on herself. She knows Luca better than anyone."

“She didn’t cheat on him, Matteo,” Gianna whispered desperately. “She would never do it. She loves Luca. And he’s going to destroy everything.”

“No,” I growled. “Aria destroyed everything. She broke Luca’s trust. She should have known better. Luca isn’t someone who ever loved or trusted anyone like he does Aria. She shouldn’t have gone behind his back.”

Gianna shook her head. “She didn’t cheat. She didn’t. He must realize that.” She closed her eyes and let out a sob that tore at my heart. Gianna wasn’t a crier, and I’d never heard a sound like that from her.

“Luca loves Aria more than his own life,” I told her. “He will put his own life down before he kills her.”

With anyone else, those words would have been a lie, but Aria might be the only one who could break my brother’s heart and come out unscathed in the end.

ARIA

Would Luca be happy when I told him about the baby? He didn’t want kids yet but I hoped he’d come to terms with my pregnancy. The most difficult part would be to keep it a secret from Lily and Gianna until I could tell Luca. I wasn’t sure when he would be done with business in New York and when he’d return to the Hamptons.

There weren’t any guards around the perimeter when the taxi driver dropped me off at the gates. I entered the code in the keypad at the gates, then slipped in, confused. I’d thought I would have to sneak in, but there wasn’t anyone around. The mansion, too, was oddly quiet when I stepped inside and the curtains in the living area were closed, stopping the early morning light from spilling in. Everyone must have left, but why?

Worry settled in the pit of my stomach.

“Lily?” I called. “Gianna?”

“They aren’t here,” came a low growl from the back.

Luca.

He was sitting in the dark on the couch. I felt for the light switch and bathed us in the soft glow. “Luca?”

My eyes took in the Christmas tree on the floor, its baubles smashed to pieces, and next to it Luca’s broken mobile. What happened here?

Had there been another Bratva attack?

My eyes found Luca hunched over on the couch, dressed in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His elbows were propped up on his strong thighs and he was staring down at something. He didn’t look up at me.

I approached him slowly, worried about his strange behavior. His shoulders were heaving with his breaths as if he’d run several miles. I stopped beside him and followed his gaze down to the black screen of his iPad.

“An associate from the press contacted me with photos that were supposed to make headline,” he said in a cold voice.

That voice wasn’t one he usually used for me.

“Photos?”

Luca touched his iPad and it flickered to life.

I sucked in a deep breath.

The screen showed a photo taken through the windows of the restaurant I’d chosen for my meeting with Val. But Val wasn’t in it.

It showed me with Dante’s hands on my shoulders. He was close behind me, his face tilted toward me, mouth close to my ear as if he was whispering secrets into it when all he’d done was warn me not to run.

The next photo was of Dante and me leaving the restaurant together, hand in hand. My face was lowered, so Luca didn’t see how tense I’d been in that moment.

Luca clicked the next photo.

A photo of me in a car with Dante, and it looked as if he had his hand between my legs—and not because he’d reached for the purse.

Bile traveled up my throat.

These looked bad.

Really bad. They would have looked bad to someone who had average trust in people, but Luca was distrustful, suspicious and cautious. For him these photos could only lead to one conclusion. But he couldn’t possibly believe I had an affair with Dante? God, he should know better. He *knew* me.

“Luca,” I whispered, reaching out to touch his shoulder, but I froze when he raised his eyes to mine. I had never seen that look in his eyes. They were wild with anger.

I wanted to run as far away as I could.

My eyes flickered to the empty bottle of whisky at his feet. Luca had drunk most of it. Some of the amber liquid had spilled and stained the beige carpet, but there were also darker stains. Slowly my gaze moved on to his hands, which were clutching a knife. One of his palms was curled around the blade so tightly that blood was dripping down his hand and onto the carpet.

I knew I *needed* to run, but that would have been admittance to a crime I hadn’t committed. I hadn’t cheated on Luca, would never do it. And the words Luca had said to me on our wedding night flashed through my mind. *Did your father never teach you to hide your fear from monsters? They give chase if you run.*

“You’re bleeding. You’ve hurt yourself,” I said in a soothing voice, trying to get through to him. I needed to get past the demons the alcohol and the compromising photos had summoned.

His face twisted with so much rage, I recoiled from it. He released the blade and more blood dripped down his hand as he straightened from the sofa.

I took a step back, couldn’t stop myself.

The arm with the knife hung limply at his side.

I forced myself to meet his gaze again. Luca was in there somewhere. Behind the anger and the hurt, my Luca was in there.

“Luca, please listen to me. It’s not how it looks.”

“So you didn’t let Cavallaro have what’s mine?” he roared. And he was upon me, his bleeding hand clamped down on my forearm. He was still holding the knife.

“I would never do that! You will always be the only man I want to be with. I went to Chicago to meet with Val and talk to Fabi. But Dante followed Val and wanted to talk to me. That’s all, I swear.”

“And what’s your swear worth? You’ve betrayed me before.”

“I never lied to you. I never cheated. I helped my sisters and didn’t always tell you everything, but I never lied to you.” He was the one who’d cheated, and it wasn’t like he’d never kept a secret from me—like Matteo asking for Gianna’s hand.

His eyes seemed to bore through me. There wasn’t only anger in them, and the other emotion worried me more, because it was agony.

“Luca, can you please put down the knife? It’s making me nervous.”

His eyes trailed down to the blood-covered blade as if he had forgotten all about it and he released it, not even hesitating despite what he thought I’d done. The steel clanged to the floor, splattering it even more with blood.

Then his eyes moved back up. He pulled me sharply against him and kissed me fiercely, *brutally*. There was only anger and despair in his kiss.

I knew what he wanted, what he needed. And I would have gladly given it to him if the test hadn't changed everything. Luca didn't want to hurt me, but the last time he'd been this angry when we'd had sex, he'd been rougher than I could risk so early in this pregnancy. I had to protect our child and Luca. He would never forgive himself if he hurt our baby.

His hands roamed over my body hungrily, and a small part of me felt exhilarated at the sensation, but I ripped away from him. "No!" He tried to pull me against him again. "Luca, stop! I don't want this!"

His lips were an inch from mine and he was breathing harshly, his eyes like molten steel. "You deny me?"

I bit back a snappy comment. I'd denied him before when I hadn't felt well or wasn't in the mood, and he had always honored my wish. I knew he was drunk and hurt and on the verge of losing control. That he hadn't yet showed how much he loved me. He had killed his first man at eleven, had killed and tortured countless more, had called himself a merciless monster on many occasions. And I knew what he was. With others.

"Funny that you say you haven't been with Dante, and yet you can't bear my touch."

God, he thought my refusal was admittance to me cheating?

"Don't do anything you will regret tomorrow," I said quietly, begging him with my eyes.

His lips curled in a cruel smile. *So wrong*. "What makes you think I would regret anything?"

I knew he would because I knew him better than anyone else, better than he knew himself.

"Our love is too important."

“Love,” he spat the word. “That I ever loved you was my biggest mistake. I won’t make it again.”

Loved? I could feel my heart shatter as I looked into his menacing face.

“Luca, please.” I reached for him but he shook me off. There was only cold anger in his eyes.

“Because you are my wife, you’ll live. Don’t expect more. We are done.”

I couldn’t comprehend what he was saying. I stared at him, my throat clogging, my heart drumming in my chest. For a moment, he hesitated but then he turned and stalked off, leaving me standing there alone.

I sank down on the sofa, where Luca had sat before. The leather was still warm. I touched my stomach and I cried. Cried because I might have destroyed our love. That Luca had let himself love me in the first place had been a miracle. What if I’d lost him forever?

I was still sitting in the same spot when Matteo entered the room cautiously a couple of hours later. He pushed the button that opened the curtains and light flooded the room. I blinked twice, but my lids felt like they were made from lead. Slowly I lowered my palm from my stomach.

“He didn’t kill you,” Matteo said. His voice didn’t reveal his emotions. His facial features were similar to Luca’s, but Matteo was poster-boy pretty where Luca was all hard lines and raw attractiveness. But he looked enough like Luca to set my heart aflame with heartbreak.

He walked toward me, his eyes taking in my bloody clothes and the blood on the couch and the ground.

“Do you need a doctor?”

“It’s not my blood,” I whispered in a raw voice.

Matteo didn’t say anything for a while, only regarded me. “Making him bleed. You are quite good at it for a woman.”

I raised my gaze to meet his straight on. My eyes burnt with unshed tears, but I couldn’t cry anymore. I’d cried for hours. I stood, legs shaky. I grabbed Matteo’s arm. He let me, only regarded me emotionlessly.

“Matteo, I didn’t do anything. I swear on my life. I swear on my…” I trailed off. I’d almost said “child.” “Please, help me. Help me make Luca see the truth.”

“The photos.”

“The photos show me with Dante in a restaurant and a car. We talked. He considered using me against the Famiglia as leverage. That’s all.”

“Then why did he let you go, Aria. Why?”

I stared up at Matteo. I couldn’t tell him about the child when I hadn’t even told Luca. “Because he has an ounce of decency in his body.”

A dark smile curled his lips. “Is that so?”

“Call Dante, call Valentina. They will tell you what I told you.”

“As if their word means anything. They are the enemy. You remember that, don’t you?”

“Then look for the person who took the photos. They probably shot more photos that prove my innocence. Isn’t it strange that Luca gets only the photos that make it look like I cheated? Perhaps someone wants to weaken Luca by destroying our marriage. Perhaps it’s the Outfit’s doing, or someone within the Famiglia.”

I could tell that Matteo was really considering it. “And you really think Luca needs you to be strong? You think they could weaken the Famiglia if they destroyed your marriage to my brother?”

I wanted to say yes, but I wasn't sure about anything anymore. I was so broken up and confused.

"I would gladly die for Luca," I said instead. "I love him more than anything else."

Except for the child growing in me. Our child.

"Then perhaps you should take that knife and put your life down."

I was stunned. "Do you think he's better off without me? Luca loves me."

Or loved? My heart clenched with a pain so acute I almost crumpled.

"He would return to being what he was before you. He'd be worse than that. He would be the monster he needs to be to reign over New York. Whatever small part of him was capable of love, maybe you killed it."

I nodded mechanically, my insides churning violently as I fought for composure. I turned away from Matteo's anger, unable to bear it because I knew he was right to be angry. Luca wasn't a normal man. He was Capo. He was raised to be Capo and for me he'd risked so much, and now he thought I'd cheated on him. If I ever managed to gain his trust back, I'd never do anything without him ever again, not for Gianna, not for Lily, not for Fabi, not for anything in this world.

"You know I've watched our father shove a needle under Luca's fingernails, have seen him cut Luca with a knife, have seen him beat Luca so hard he lost consciousness, but through all that, I never saw Luca show the agony he had on his face when he saw you with Dante."

I cupped my mouth with my palm, and sobbed. I couldn't bear the thought of having hurt Luca like that. "I didn't cheat," I choked out. "If you don't believe me, torture me. You said it yourself once: if you use your knife on me, I won't be able to keep a secret."

Matteo walked around to face me and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what I believe as long as Luca thinks you cheated.”

I touched his forearm. “Please, Matteo, help me prove my innocence. Please, not just for me.”

“Even if you didn’t cheat on him, you went behind his back. You visited enemy territory and risked not only your life, but also Luca’s. He would have put down his life in front of Dante to save you; had you thought about that when you strutted around Chicago?”

“I only wanted to see Fabi. It’s Christmas time,” I said voicelessly.

“Yeah, well, now we’ll all have a fucking marvelous Christmas, thanks to you.”

The corners of my vision turned black. I felt faint. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the pregnancy, because I hadn’t eaten anything in close to a day or because my heart was breaking. I swayed and my legs folded in on themselves.

“Fuck,” Matteo growled and grabbed my arms, stopping my fall. He helped me down on the sofa before he squatted in front of me. He grasped my chin and tilted my face up so I met his hard, relentless eyes. “You swear you didn’t cheat on Luca?”

“I swear it, Matteo. I would never cheat on Luca. I love him. There’s no other man and there won’t ever be.”

He sighed and released my chin. “I’ll try to get my hands on the photographer who took the photos, and then I’ll have a long talk with him. It won’t be easy. I can’t go to Chicago, and there are very few men I can send there in my stead, but there may be another way.... But even if I get my hands on the guy and he proves your innocence, I can’t promise that Luca will come around. The only reason he believed you cheated in the first place is because you went behind his back.” He shook his head again. “Fuck.” He

straightened. “Are you sure you don’t want to see the Doc? You look a mess.”

“I’m sure,” I said quickly. I didn’t want the Doc to find out I was pregnant. He would tell Luca. He wasn’t bound by medical confidentiality like other doctors.

“I will release Gianna now,” Matteo said with a sigh.

“Release her?” I whispered.

“Locked her in the car.”

As he walked out he raised his mobile to his head. “Romero? Yeah, I need you to come over.”

I stared down at the carpet with the bloodstains. Luca’s blood.

“Aria!” Gianna’s scream made me jump and then she stormed my way, hair wild and nightgown half-torn as if she’d struggled, and flung herself at me, hugging me so tightly I couldn’t breathe. She shook against me, and something wet hit my throat.

I touched the back of her head. “Shh. I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not,” Gianna whispered as she pulled back, her eyes raking over me before they moved on to the mess on the carpet. “Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head even as my heart clenched tightly.

“I thought he’d kill you. I wanted to warn you but Matteo, the asshole, didn’t let me.”

It felt like part of me had died, but Luca would never kill me.

“Matteo tried to save your pretty ass,” Matteo said to Gianna. “While something stops Luca from snapping Aria’s neck, it won’t stop him with you, trust me.”

“I’m not talking to you,” Gianna said sharply, and this time it wasn’t a game.

I touched her leg. “He wanted to protect you. Don’t be mad at him, please. It’s bad enough that I destroyed my own marriage; I don’t want to be responsible for another one.”

“Luca will come around,” she said, but her words lacked conviction.

The sound of the front door opening and closing filled me with hope but when Lily and Romero walked in, not Luca, I deflated. Lily also came over to me and hugged me tightly, her arms trembling. Her eyes were red from crying. Guilt crashed over me.

“We were so worried about you,” she said. I raised my eyes to Romero, who stood beside Matteo and listened to him, but Romero’s eyes were on me. Pity showed in his, not anger as I’d expected, and for some reason that made things worse.

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chapter 18

MATTEO

I tried calling Luca on his second mobile again but he didn't pick up. Where the fuck was he?

My eyes slanted over to Aria, Gianna and Lily.

When I'd entered the mansion fifteen minutes ago and seen the bloody handprints on the door and bloodstains on the marble floor, I was sure I'd find Aria dead, and ultimately also Luca, because killing her would have been his end, but she was miraculously unharmed.

Fuck, Luca, where are you?

He was out for blood, no doubt. What if he was on his way to Chicago? What if he was trying to kill Dante on his own?

Fuck!

I took out my second mobile and called Orazio then hung up, waiting for him to call me back in case he couldn't talk freely at the moment. It took five minutes before he called me back, and I was in my car by that time and heading for New York. I needed to find Luca before he got himself killed, or caught by the police while killing others.

"Matteo, what can I do for you?" Orazio said.

I'd never been more relieved that Orazio was our spy in the Outfit. He had been working with us for two years now and had never let us down. "In case Luca shows up in Chicago, make sure you knock him out before he gets near Dante."

“What?” Orazio muttered. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

Orazio was silent. He wasn’t a very communicative man anyway.

“I need you to find someone for me. It’s a photographer. I sent you an email with the details. Get him as fast as possible and *ask* him who paid him to take the photos of Dante and Aria.”

“Wait, what? What photos?”

“Read my fucking email. And when you’re done asking him, you will take him to New York.”

Silence. “You want me to come to New York?”

“Not for long. You will return to Chicago once you’ve handed over the photographer.”

“Will do,” Orazio said, but I could hear a hint of hesitation in his tone.

“You’ve been working for us for two years,” I reminded him. If Dante found out, even Orazio’s status as Valentina’s brother wouldn’t grant him a quick death.

Orazio got the unvoiced threat and hung up. He would bring me that photographer, and then I’d have a very long, intense conversation with the fucker.

It was evening when Demetrio called me over my headset. He was Luca’s and my cousin, Gottardo’s bastard son. “What is it?”

I still hadn’t found any trace of Luca, and I couldn’t involve anyone in the search except for Romero. If word got out what had happened, things would get uncomfortable in the Famiglia. “Someone slaughtered every member of the Jersey MC.”

My foot on the gas eased up. “Where?”

“Their clubhouse. I’m there. Orfeo and I were supposed to meet their president to give them a warning, but someone got to them before us.”

Fuck. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

I floored the gas and bent low over my Kawasaki, weaving through traffic at blinding speed.

The moment I saw Orfeo’s and Demetrio’s faces, I knew it was bad. They had been Made Men for five years now and had seen a lot of shit. They were good soldiers, efficient and loyal. I walked into the clubhouse and my nose clogged up from the stench. Blood. Sweat. Piss. Shit.

Fear.

My eyes took in the bloody mess. Limbs, skin and blood everywhere. “How do you know these are all the members?”

“We counted the bodies,” Orfeo said with a grimace.

“I don’t see any bodies,” I muttered. Someone had pretty much torn every single body to shreds. I spotted a bloody axe on the ground covered in blood and pieces of flesh.

“We counted the heads,” Demetrio added with a wry smile, exchanging a look with Orfeo.

The heads were in bad shape too, but they were still recognizable as heads.

“Burn down everything. Don’t leave any traces behind,” I ordered.

“Don’t you want to find out who did this?” Orfeo asked.

“No,” I snarled. “Burn everything down.”

I knew who had done this, and I had to make sure I stopped him before he did worse.

“Fuck,” Demetrio exclaimed, eyes filling with realization. He and Orfeo exchanged another look. Best friends since birth. “It was Luca, right?”

I considered my options. Luca needed to appear strong. If I tried to hide his involvement, people would get suspicious. I shrugged. “He thought it would send the other MCs a nice message. Take photos before you burn everything down, and send it to every fucking MC in our territory who wants to piss in our pond.”

Orfeo let out a disbelieving laugh, a mixture of disgust and respect on his face. “He did this alone? Fuck, he’s a beast.”

I turned around and left them to their task.

Where the hell was my brother?

LUCA

I watched the girl thrust her naked ass up before she swung herself around the pole, her dark eyes locking on mine, red painted lips pulling wide into a flirty smile. She fell to the floor and crawled toward me, her drooping top revealing big fake tits.

“I see you’re checking out our new stripper,” Matteo said as he sank into the armchair beside me. I ignored him as the girl rolled onto her back and pulled back her top, revealing fat pierced nipples, which she began twisting as she fucked me with her eyes. I could take her into one of the rooms in the back of the Pergola and fuck her brains out.

“I’ve been searching for you since yesterday,” Matteo said, his voice on edge.

He leaned forward, barring my view of the girl. I narrowed my eyes at him. His brown eyes searched my face as if he was looking for a fucking treasure hidden somewhere. “You look calm.”

“I am calm,” I said.

“Demetrio told me he got word someone massacred every member of the MC in New Jersey. Remember the fuckers who thought they could take over the gun trade in Jersey?”

I watched the girl over Matteo’s head. She returned to the pole and whirled around it topless, tits jiggling up and down.

“I went there. Complete bloodbath. Limbs and skin everywhere. Ten dead.” Matteo raised his eyebrows. “They were chopped into pieces. Most of the work was done with an axe, but a few got a bit of love with a skinning knife.” He leaned forward and tapped the knife strapped to my chest.

The dancer lifted herself up on the pole and spread her legs in a wide V. Matteo whirled around to her. “Why don’t you fuck off?”

Her eyes grew wide and she released the pole before she ran toward the changing rooms. My eyes followed her ass. I hadn’t fucked anyone’s ass since Grace four years ago.

“Do I have to get naked so you will listen to me?”

I leaned back in my chair. “I’m listening.”

“I assume you did that.”

“Their screams and their blood felt like fucking paradise,” I murmured.

Matteo shook his head. “Fuck, Luca. You won’t go ballistic on me, right? The last time I saw you…fuck. And now you’re all calm—that’s strange even for you.”

“I am calm.”

Matteo sat back in his chair, bringing distance between us, and I knew I’d hate what he had to say next. “I saw Aria in the mansion yesterday morning.”

My heart clenched fucking tight, but I kept a calm face. “She will stay there. She won’t return to New York. Have Sandro watch her.”

Matteo rubbed his temple. “Luca, listen, I know you don’t want to hear it, but I don’t think Aria cheated on you.”

I stood, my eyes drawn to the changing room door where the stripper had disappeared. Matteo shoved my chest, eyes blazing with fury.

“For fuck’s sake, will you stop this shit? You’re freaking even me out and I’ve seen you at your worst.” He paused. “Though I have to admit what you did in that clubhouse may be the most twisted shit I have ever seen.”

“You saw the photos of Dante and Aria,” I pressed out through a fucking tight throat. I clenched my fists, hating that my body betrayed me.

“They show nothing. I talked to Orazio. He got his hands on the photographer and will bring him to us tomorrow.”

“I can’t take in Orazio now. We need him as a spy.”

Matteo rolled his eyes. “I know, and he will return to Chicago.” He’d been rising in rank since Valentina married Dante. As her brother he was our perfect asset.

“Did you hear what I said? We can talk to the photographer tomorrow. Orazio already questioned him and it’s like Aria said, she met with Val, then Dante joined them and forced Aria to leave the restaurant with him, but tomorrow you can make him tell you the same thing again if you don’t believe me.”

I nodded, but apart from that didn’t react. My outsides were stone but I couldn’t control my fucking insides. I felt fucking relieved, but it didn’t matter anymore. Yesterday had showed me one thing: I had grown weak because of Aria. She was a weakness—a weakness I couldn’t allow myself as Capo.

“So will you help me interrogate that asshole?”

I smirked. “Sure.”

Matteo frowned. “I’m not sure you really get what I’m telling you.”

“Oh I do,” I said quietly. “Aria went to Chicago behind my back. That is fact. She didn’t cheat, who gives a fuck?” The words seemed to scorch my throat. A fucking lie. Even thinking of Aria being with someone other than me felt like a stab in the heart.

A weakness.

I’d never been weak in my life.

Aria was a weakness I couldn’t allow myself.

Matteo shook his head. “Whatever. Tomorrow we’ll talk to that photographer. Maybe you’ll be more tolerable afterwards.”

Orazio nodded at me as I shook his hand. He was only a couple of inches shorter than me. It was unmistakable that he was related to Valentina. Same eyes, same hair color. At least he wasn’t fawning over Dante.

Dante. My blood boiled only thinking of him, of his hands on Aria’s shoulders, of his mouth close to her ear, and his fucking arm between her legs...

Matteo shoved me. “Will you snap out of it for fuck’s sake? I can’t have you go on another killing spree.”

“Why not? I’m sure it will silence many of our enemies.”

Matteo shook his head before he turned to Orazio, who was listening with mild interest.

“Where is the asshole?” Matteo asked.

“Trunk. Pissed his pants. That’s why I didn’t want him on my backseat,” Orazio said. He led us to the back of his BMW and opened the trunk. A short, fat guy in his thirties was curled up inside. He stank of piss, shit and sweat. He blinked up at us through teary eyes, his mouth covered with tape.

I grabbed him by the throat and lifted him out, then thrust him to the ground. Behind us the building of the old Yonkers power plant rose into the sky.

Gateway to Hell.

I smiled down at the sniveling man on the ground as he watched me like I was the devil. “So you took those pictures?” I asked in a low growl as I knelt down beside the man, unsheathing my knife from my chest holster. I removed the tape so he could talk, but more than that: so I could hear his screams.

He eyed the blade with open horror. “Please! I only did what I was paid to do. I didn’t mean any harm.”

My smile widened. This was who I was destined to be. Brutal. Cruel. Merciless. Not the fucking emotional mess Aria turned me into.

Most of the time I let Matteo handle the torture because he was a master at it. He loved to play with his victims. I preferred the kill. Not today. Orazio and Matteo stood back as I dealt with the photographer. He’d long revealed his last secret when I plunged my knife into his fucking heart and granted him death. For a long time, there was silence after that as I tried to get a handle on my fury.

Dante had let the photographer take those photos and had sent them to me because he knew Aria was my fucking weakness. He’d hoped I’d lose my shit, had hoped I’d go on a rampage, maybe even attack Chicago. I wasn’t sure.

Orazio cleared his throat. “I also found out yesterday that Gottardo and Ermano contacted Dante a few weeks ago to help him throw you over. Dante was wary of them, thought it was a trap, but in our meeting yesterday Scuderi encouraged him to trust in them.”

“Gottardo and fucking Ermano. Those fucking bastards,” I hissed, focusing on them instead of the fact that Dante fucking Cavallaro had tried to make me believe Aria had an affair with him. Fuck him!

Love, a fucking weakness!

Matteo watched me cautiously as if he thought I’d snap Orazio’s or his neck just to kill something. “At least it’s only them and a couple of low soldiers. Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Oh we will handle them,” I said. “I wish I hadn’t given Gottardo a quick death.”

“You crushed his throat, Luca. There are nicer ways to die,” Matteo said. Orazio’s eyebrows rose in mild curiosity.

“Nicer than what Ermano will get.”

“For sure,” Matteo said.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll return to Chicago before someone notices I’m gone,” Orazio said. I gave him a quick nod. He exchanged a few more words with Matteo before he drove off.

Matteo stepped up to my side. “So Aria didn’t cheat.”

“We should attack tonight. I want to weed out the root of our problem as soon as possible. The family is full of traitors, I always knew Gottardo was one. And now Ermano too. Those two were always thick.”

Matteo scowled. “Luca, did you hear what I said?”

I got into his face. “Stay out of my marriage, Matteo, and you’d better make sure your own wife doesn’t turn you into a fucking fool.”

Matteo didn’t say anything, and it was for the best because I was out for blood again.

That night, Romero, Matteo and I attacked Ermano’s holiday house in the Hamptons. Ermano was supposed to return to Atlanta in the morning. He would never return. Orfeo and Demetrio were on their way to capture

Gottardo's other legitimate son. I knew Demetrio would have no trouble handling his half-brother. No love was wasted between those two.

I killed Ermano's first soldier with a twist of his neck before he could call out a warning, Matteo took down the second with his knife. Not waiting to see if Romero had disabled the third, I raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time. A door to my right opened, and I slashed my knife toward the person and arched up in the last second, impaling the blade a couple of inches above the head of a young girl. Her mouth opened for a cry and I clamped my hand down on her lips. She struggled as my arm wrapped around her waist. She fought hard as I leaned down to her ear. "Not a sound. Nothing will happen to you, Kiara." Her eyes flickered with recognition. "Where is your father?"

My cousin pointed toward the door at the end of the corridor, her upper arms littered with bruises. I released her and she looked at me with huge eyes, wrapping her arms around herself. My eyes took in the bruises on her collarbones and her swollen cheek. Ermano was my father's brother through and through.

Matteo ran toward me and I pushed Kiara toward him, then crept toward the door she had indicated. She hadn't lied. She had no reason to. Before I could open the door, someone else did. His wife stood before me. Ermano must have sent her to investigate the noise. Fucking coward.

I shoved her to the side and barely managed to avoid a bullet. Ermano was hiding behind the massive bed and firing at me. A heavy thud sounded a second before I flung myself to the ground and pulled my own gun. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw his wife on the ground, bleeding from a wound in her head. Ermano had shot his own wife by accident, or perhaps on purpose—who knew what went on in the crazy fucker's head? I wouldn't shoot him. That would be too quick.

Matteo crouched in the corridor, and motioned for me to stay down.

I crawled closer to the bed.

“What do you want?” Ermano screamed.

“Come out, then you’ll get a quick death,” Matteo shouted. As if that was going to happen. I’d tear him apart piece by piece, muscle, bone and skin.

I crawled even closer to the bed. I could see Ermano’s knees through the gap under the bed. I aimed toward his right kneecap and fired. His piercing scream was music to my ears. I pushed off the ground and was beside my uncle in two large steps, gripping him by the throat and lifting him until we were eye level.

“You can kiss that quick death goodbye, Uncle,” I snarled.

Two hours later, Matteo and I left the mansion. Romero would deal with the cleaning brigade. When we approached Matteo’s Porsche Cayenne, a disheveled brown head poked up from the backseat.

“Fuck,” Matteo muttered. “I forgot about Kiara.”

I rubbed a hand over my head. “How old is she?”

“I have no clue. We have too many cousins. Twelve?”

Sighing, I opened the back door and leaned in. Kiara flinched away from me and pulled her legs up against her chest. “How old are you?” I asked her in as civil a tone as I could manage after chopping her father into pieces.

She watched me like I was going to kill her.

I scanned Kiara’s face closely, trying to remember. “Twelve?”

She swallowed.

I closed the door and Matteo locked it before I slipped into the passenger seat. “Where?” Matteo asked.

She was our cousin, and I needed to make sure she was safe, but my options were limited. She was too young to be married off, and honor dictated that I chose family, but whom could I trust? Aunt Egidia and her husband Felix in Baltimore were the most decent of the bunch. “Egidia. Until then we’ll take her to Marianna and her husband.”

“What will happen to me?” she whispered eventually.

She was still clutching her legs against her chest. “You will be safe.”

Matteo rolled his eyes at me. “Nobody will hurt you, Kiara, least of all Luca or me.”

I was glad when we dropped our cousin at Marianna’s home. Her husband was a loyal soldier and would make sure Kiara was safe until she could move in with Aunt Egidia.

Afterwards, Matteo drove to the meeting point we’d agreed on with Demetrio and Orfeo—the Yonker power plant. Angelo, Gottardo’s last legitimate son, was bound to a chair.

He glared when I approached, then he spat at Demetrio’s feet. “You bring shame to our name. Son of a whore. My father should have never welcomed you into our home.”

“Welcomed?” Demetrio hissed.

“He’s mine,” I warned before Demetrio could shove a knife into his half-brother. I pulled out my own knife. “Let’s see what kind of secrets you’ve got for us, Angelo.”

After tonight, the Famiglia would be free of traitors and ready to brave the war with the Outfit, and I would lead them with brutal focus without the shackles of love holding me back. No matter how long it took, no matter how many lives it would cost, I would bring Dante Cavallaro down—even if it killed me.

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chapter 19

ARIA

Romero stayed with us in the mansion almost constantly in the days after Luca left me heartbroken. I knew he and my sisters were worried about me because I barely ate. Not for lack of trying but the smell of most food made me feel sick. Luca stayed in New York. He hadn't as much as messaged me in three days, and I could hardly stand it. Since our wedding, I'd been with him practically every day, and I missed him horribly, not just at night.

I woke up before sunrise, feeling cold despite the two blankets I used at night. I slid out of bed, grabbed my bathrobe and threw it over my nightgown before I moved out of my room and downstairs, then out onto the terrace. Shivering, I searched the premises until my eyes found Romero doing sprints and burpees like every morning. Gianna and Lily were still asleep, and would stay asleep for several more hours.

After a few minutes, he noticed me and jogged toward me, his shirt plastered to his sweaty chest. "Aria, what's wrong?"

I let out a choked laugh, peering up at him, and he nodded. "He will come around," he said. "He knows you didn't cheat. Matteo found the photographer and he confirmed your story."

I knew what that meant, knew a man had gone through hell on earth so I could prove my innocence, but there was no guilt. I felt empty.

"When?"

"Yesterday."

Luca hadn’t contacted me, so either he still believed I’d cheated or he really didn’t love me anymore.

I touched my stomach and looked out toward the ocean.

“He needs time to calm down. You going to Chicago behind his back, that left scars and came at the worst possible time. Luca is dealing with a lot of shit from his family at the moment.”

I sighed, hoping Romero was right, hoping Luca would give us another chance. I couldn’t imagine a life without him at my side. “I need to ask a favor of you,” I said eventually, and Romero tensed.

“Aria, now isn’t the time to do anything that could anger Luca any more.”

“I know. Don’t you think I don’t know that?” I whispered harshly. “But he isn’t talking to me. He said he’s done with me, and I don’t have time to wait for him to forgive me.”

Romero frowned. “Why? What is it you need me to do?”

“I need you to take me to New York to a doctor.” I touched my stomach again and Romero followed the movement.

He took a step closer, surprised. “You are pregnant?”

“That’s what the pregnancy test said. That’s the reason why Dante let me go.”

Romero’s face tightened with hatred. “Dante knows you are pregnant? Damn,” he said, lips twisting. “You should tell Luca.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Not when he’s angry, not when he doesn’t want anything to do with me. I don’t want him to feel obligated to return to me because of the child. I want him to return to me because he wants to. And he isn’t in the best state of mind at the moment.”

“That’s true,” Romero said slowly. I could tell he was hiding something. “Eventually, you won’t be able to hide it.”

My stomach tightened. “You think he will stay angry with me for months?” His face gave me the answer I had feared. Maybe I’d really lost him.

A man who had never slept in a bed with someone else, who was never around people without a gun, not even his brother, because he had learned from an early age that trust got you killed—he had trusted me, and I had messed it up.

“If you let me take a quick shower, we can head out right away,” Romero said eventually.

It took me a couple of heartbeats to process his words. “Yes, please. I will get ready.”

Forty minutes later Romero and I were on our way to New York. Gianna and Lily had still been asleep when we left, and Sandro and two other guards would keep watch.

I had put on my wig again so people wouldn’t recognize me. Nobody could find out about my pregnancy.

“Will you tell your sisters?” Romero asked.

I hesitated. “I’d prefer if this could stay between us for a while.” Romero slanted me a conflicted look, but then he nodded. I knew he didn’t like keeping things from Lily, but too much had happened in the last few days, and I needed time to figure out things for myself before I involved more people.

Romero waited in the waiting room as I followed Dr. Brightley into the treatment room. She confirmed my pregnancy and told me I was six weeks along. When I emerged afterward and Romero led me into the elevator, I missed Luca so much, I couldn’t hold back tears. He should have been there with me, should have shared this joyful moment with me.

Romero touched my shoulder but I leaned against him, seeking comfort, and after a moment of hesitation, he wrapped his arms around me. “Aria, Luca will come back to you.”

I wanted to believe him, wanted nothing more. Nodding, I pulled back and wiped my eyes, embarrassed about my outburst. Even if Luca’s absence broke my heart, I needed to be strong for our baby.

I was nervous. This was the first time I’d see Luca in three weeks. We hadn’t talked or messaged. I had sent him a couple of messages in the beginning but then given up when he ignored them. If he needed space, I’d give it to him even if it killed me.

“We should celebrate without the men,” Gianna muttered. “They’re only going to ruin everything.” She meant Luca, and I worried she was right. How could this Christmas be anything but a huge mess with the way things were?

I stepped out of the shower and had to grip the marble counter as a wave of dizziness hit me. I was nine weeks along and didn’t have a bump yet, but the pregnancy ruled my life anyway. I’d lost over ten pounds in the last three weeks because I couldn’t keep any food down. Dr. Brightley wasn’t concerned yet since the baby was developing as it should. I put on my underwear and stepped into the bedroom. Would Luca share a bed with me tonight?

“Fuck, Aria,” Gianna said, pursing her lips as she watched me. “You have lost so much weight.”

“You’re exaggerating,” I said lightly. I grabbed the cream-colored wool dress and pulled it on. It used to hug my curves but now it was loose.

Gianna raised her eyebrows. “That doesn’t look like exaggerating to me.”

“It’s nothing,” I said firmly.

Gianna stepped close. “You are so fucking pale. And those shadows under your eyes.” She shook her head. “You know what. We’ll only put on a bare minimum of makeup. Let him see what he does to you.”

I was too tired to protest and let her apply a hint of foundation and mascara.

“I’m going to kill him if he treats you like shit. I swear. I’m going to stick one of Matteo’s knives into his fucking cruel heart.”

“Gianna,” I said in warning. “I am the one who went behind his back.”

“You went to visit our little brother. Luca cheated on you with Grace only because you didn’t want to put out, and he didn’t tell you when Matteo asked our father for permission to marry me. And I bet he’s lied to you about more things we don’t know about, but only because you don’t obey him like a well-behaved dog, he feels betrayed. Stupid pride of Made Men.”

I wished it were only pride holding Luca back, but I knew it was more—it was darker and more powerful.

Lily knocked and poked her head in. “Dinner is done. Marianna says we can sit down.”

“Is he here?” I asked, hating how my voice broke.

Lily’s expression softened. “Yes, he and Matteo arrived fifteen minutes ago. They are downstairs with Romero.”

Gianna checked her reflection in my mirror. She, too, had barely seen Matteo because she preferred to stay with me, still mad at him, while he was with Luca in New York.

I straightened, hoping I could hold it together. My pregnancy was turning me into an emotional mess.

Gianna squeezed my hand and didn’t let go. “Come on, Aria. You have us. Nothing will ever change that. They have their Famiglia and their blood oath, but we are sisters, we are blood, and we will be at your side till the end of all days.”

Lily took my other hand with a resolute smile. “If you can’t stand his presence, then we’ll leave. We can have dinner in the kitchen. Just the three of us.”

I fought tears.

“Don’t cry,” Gianna ordered. “He’ll think it’s because of him. Don’t give him that power.”

But he had that power over my heart, and there was nothing I could do about it. I resisted the urge to touch my belly, proof of a love lost.

I swallowed, and nodded. “Let’s go.”

We stepped out of the room, into the corridor and toward the staircase. Then I heard his deep voice, and only my sisters’ hold kept me moving. Gianna’s grip on my hand became crushing as we descended the staircase, closer to his voice. As one we stepped into the dining room and my eyes zeroed in on Luca, standing tall next to Matteo and Romero, looking calm. No sign that the last three weeks had affected him. Could he move on like that? Could he switch off his love as easily as that?

Lily squeezed my hand and Gianna stiffened at my side. “Fuck him, Aria. Fuck them all,” she whispered.

And I was determined to follow her advice—but then Luca turned his head and looked straight at me, and my world crumpled. There had been brief moments of hope in these weeks of despair, either because I’d tried to talk myself into believing I could live without Luca, or because I managed to convince myself he would come around.

Now as his hard gray eyes regarded me as they did anyone else, with cold scrutiny and not a hint of warmth, both hopes turned to dust.

LUCA

“You won’t ruin this Christmas for all of us, will you?” Matteo asked. As if his relationship with Gianna had been going well these last few weeks. He’d been my shadow in New York and Gianna had refused to come with him. They were barely civil around each other.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t worry. Aria is my wife on paper, but that’s all.” I had closed off my fucking emotions in the last three weeks, and I had absolutely no intention of changing that. I had more important things to worry about—like bringing down Dante and the Outfit with him. It wasn’t something I could manage in a few weeks or months, and certainly not as long as my actions were still fueled by fury. I needed to make a plan that would guarantee our success once and for all.

Movement near the door attracted my attention and I turned my head toward it, and a sledgehammer of emotions smashed into me.

Aria, all slender grace and long blonde hair, stood between her sisters. My eyes lingered on the dark shadows under her eyes, on the way her cheekbones had sharpened, on the way her dress hung from her body. Guilt crashed down on me but I squashed it. I had no reason to be guilty. She was the one who had betrayed me.

“Only on paper, that’s all, my ass,” Matteo muttered.

I tore my gaze away from Aria, steeling myself. I went over to the dining room table and took my usual seat. Matteo took his seat across from

me, regarding me like I was about to lose my shit. If he didn't stop the constant hovering soon, I would lose my shit *on him.*

After a moment of hesitation, Aria sank down beside me, and her sweet flowery scent flooded my nose.

She didn't touch me, and I didn't reach for her either.

Gianna sat across from me with a look of complete hatred. I stared back at her, giving her the full force of my Capo scowl, and eventually she looked away. I was done being tolerant. I was Capo, and I'd fucking act like one.

When Romero and Lily had taken their seats as well, Marianna came in with our food. She pursed her lips at me but didn't say anything. We ate in silence for a while. Aria had barely touched her food, nor drunk any of her wine. Her hands shook as she held her fork.

I wouldn't let her manipulate me into feeling guilty.

ARIA

Shortly after dinner, I had to excuse myself and stumbled into one of the guest bathrooms to throw up. Romero joined me a few minutes later. I was kneeling on the floor, arms propped up on the closed toilet lid and cheek resting on them.

Romero crouched beside me, voice soft. "Tell him, Aria."

"He will think I want to use the pregnancy as a way to guilt him back to me. I won't do that. I want him to return to me out of love, Romero." My voice broke and tears sprang into my eyes.

Romero regarded me silently. This time he didn't tell me Luca would come around. He straightened and held out his hand. I let him pull me to my

feet and washed my hands and rinsed my mouth.

Holding my head high, I returned to the living and dining area but only found Lily and Gianna, huddling close together on the sofa.

“They went into the lounge to drink Scotch,” Gianna muttered.

“Oh,” I said quietly.

Despite my tiredness I stayed in the living room for as long as possible, hoping Luca would join us, but he didn’t and eventually I walked up to our bedroom and lay down. I wasn’t sure how much later it was when I heard the creak of the door. Turning around, my eyes found Luca’s tall form, and hope swelled in my chest.

“Luca?” I whispered.

He didn’t say anything, and I turned on the light. He was rummaging in the drawers and pulled out sweatpants before he turned to leave.

“Aren’t you going to stay?” I asked, hating how my voice shook.

His shoulders tensed under his shirt. He didn’t turn around as he spoke in a hard voice. “No. But I can fuck you if that’s what you want?”

I sucked in a shaky breath. “Don’t do this.”

Without another word, he left and after a moment, I turned off the lights with trembling fingers.

The next time he spoke to me was during breakfast the next morning, to inform me that we would be required to attend Senator Parker’s Sylvester party together. He returned to New York after that.

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chapter 20

ARIA

“Do me a favor and don’t go,” Gianna pleaded. We’d been looking for new dresses for the party for close to two hours, and my nausea was becoming increasingly worse. I knew Gianna and Lily worried, but I couldn’t tell them. Luca was supposed to find out first, but how was that ever going to happen?

I browsed through the display of dresses. “It would raise questions if Luca went alone.”

“Aria, please.”

I glanced over my shoulder at my sister. Something in her voice worried me. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Gianna moved closer to me. “Matteo mentioned that Grace will be there.”

My fingers on the dress tightened. “I thought she was in England.”

“She was. She’s married to some rich English businessman but she will attend the party.”

I swallowed. “I can handle her.”

Gianna gripped my arm. “Aria this will get ugly. Don’t go. Please.”

I forced a smile. “Don’t worry about me.” I pulled out an elegant cream-colored floor-length dress, moved into the changing room and put it on. It was form-fitting with a low back. I scanned my stomach. Was it obvious that I was pregnant? Gianna poked her head in and I stiffened, but she only

whistled. “Take that. You look breathtaking. Let Luca see what he is losing.”

No revealing dress would convince Luca to love me again. It didn’t work like that.

Sandro picked Gianna and me up in the mansion and took us to New York, where we met with Luca and Matteo in the garage of our apartment. Luca was dressed in a sleek black suit, accentuating his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

He didn’t bat an eye when he saw me in my dress. His face was stone, and his eyes froze my insides with their coldness. Without a word, I got into the passenger seat of his car. We drove in silence toward the Parker town house.

Before we got out, Luca turned to me but his eyes held no warmth. “We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves, so we will act civil.” He raised his eyebrows in silent question and I gave a nod.

Luca got out and opened my door. I braced myself for what would happen but the moment Luca’s palm touched my naked back, every muscle in my body sprang to life with need and longing.

Luca’s fingers tensed against my skin, and I looked up but found his face completely blank. He led me toward the house without a word or glance.

Gianna and Matteo were already there, drinking champagne and talking. They seemed to be getting along better again, or perhaps they were being civil in public like Luca and me.

Luca led me toward them and dropped his hand the moment we arrived. “I will get us something to drink.” He didn’t wait for my reply and left.

Gianna scowled at his back before she gave me an encouraging smile. I tried to give her a smile in return, but her brows drew together. She stepped closer and gripped my arm. “Aria, don’t let him win. Don’t give him that power over you,” she whispered harshly.

I nodded and put on my public mask, head held high. Luca didn’t return and when I scanned the room, I found him in conversation with Senator Parker. That’s when I saw her. Grace Parker. Tall, gorgeous and dressed in a tight jumpsuit that left little to the imagination. She was alone, no English husband in sight. I remembered when I’d caught him with her, remembered the feeling of disappointment and sorrow, and I hadn’t even loved him back then.

Luca spotted her about the same time as I did, and his eyes didn’t move on from her. Was that how he wanted to punish me?

“He wouldn’t dare,” Gianna hissed.

Matteo’s reply came through the fog in my ears. “He won’t.”

Grace stepped up to Luca with a sexy smile, and Luca smirked. I remembered that look from the photos I’d seen of him in his bachelor days —like a man who knew what he had to offer and who took what women offered him.

My stomach constricted so hard, sickness washed over me. I turned on my heel and hurried into the bathroom at the end of the corridor. I barely managed to close the door and reach the toilet before I threw up, retching violently until nothing was left in my stomach. Beads of sweat coated my forehead. I reached for the flush with trembling fingers.

Gianna’s soft knock sounded a few moments later. “Aria, let me in.”

I faced the mirror and touched my stomach.

“Aria, please let me help you.”

She couldn’t help me. This was a battle I had to fight alone because it was a fight against my heart.

Luca’s words from weeks ago flashed in my mind: *We are done.*

Yes, we were.

LUCA

Grace circled me like a vulture. She’d married some old fucker with millions in his bank account, but now she eye-fucked me like she’d done in the past.

“Have you gotten bored of your wife already? I told you she couldn’t satisfy you.”

“Don’t talk about her,” I said in warning. She seemed to have forgotten my warning from last time.

Matteo raised his eyebrows at me from across the room. I didn’t see Aria or Gianna anywhere, and I was fucking glad. Aria in that almost white dress, like a fucking apparition, a fucking angel.

A weakness.

“I’m not here to talk, don’t worry,” she purred. My eyes were drawn to her cleavage.

“What are you here for then?” I asked with a curl of my lip.

“To fuck.” She smiled. “Come on, Luca.”

I followed a few steps behind her, my eyes on her ass in that joke of a jumpsuit. She led me into her old bedroom, a room I had good memories of.

Grace closed the door and turned to me, licking her red lips. “Oh, I missed having your cock in me, Luca,” she crooned as she stepped up to me

and leaned in to kiss me.

“No kissing,” I growled, glaring down at her. She pouted but didn’t try again. I had never liked kissing her, now less than ever.

Her long nails raked down my chest, then lower. I had to fight the urge to shove her hand away. I wasn’t hard yet, not even close. Her touch actually fucking disgusted me.

Confusion flickered on her face, then a daring smile. “Playing hard to get?”

“One of us has to,” I muttered, hating her and hating myself.

She flushed but didn’t let my harshness deter her. She got on her knees, making an innocent face. It looked fucking fake. And it had the opposite effect on me than she intended. I remembered Aria’s innocent smiles, her innocent touches as I’d made her mine.

Aria.

Fuck.

Always Aria.

Then I remembered the last time she’d taken me into her mouth, her perfect lips, her teasing. I loved how she’d grown more confident when it came to sex over the years. I loved her scent, her taste, her silky skin. Fuck it. I fucking loved everything about her, loved her still. Loved every fucking inch of her, but most of all her laughter and smiles, and the way she looked at me with love and trust.

I staggered back from Grace’s fingers on my zipper. She dropped her hand, eyes narrowing.

“What now? Don’t tell me you can’t cheat on your goody-two-shoes Aria.”

I grasped her arm in a death grip. “Don’t you dare insult her. Don’t even speak her name.” I pushed her away from me, so fucking furious I could

hardly control myself. Furious at myself for my weakness, for my useless feelings. Then I turned around and went back to the party.

Matteo was at my side in a heartbeat. “That was a quickie if I ever saw one.” His voice was strange but I had no patience to analyze his mood.

“I couldn’t do it. Couldn’t even let her suck my cock. Fuck it.” What the fuck had I become?

“Because of Aria.”

I curled my hands into fists, wanting to destroy something, wanting to kill and maim. “I’m fucking weak,” I said quietly.

“Weak?” Matteo laughed. “Luca, you killed a clubhouse full of bikers, tore them to shreds, you tortured our uncle for hours without batting an eye, and you wouldn’t feel a flicker of remorse if you killed every fucker in this room. You aren’t weak because of your feelings for Aria. Our father was a sadistic asshole and insane.”

“I’m like a castrated dog.”

Matteo groaned, glaring. “You know Aria never cheated on you. That woman has always and will always belong only to you, Luca.”

“I know,” I growled. And fuck me, I knew she had been faithful, not only because the photographer had confirmed her story, but also because Aria wasn’t like that. She wouldn’t cheat. I’d realized it quickly, but I was still fucking mad at her for going behind my back, and I was too fucking proud to apologize. “And apparently I can’t cheat on her either.”

“She’s got you pussy-whipped.”

If it were only that. She had my cold heart in an unrelenting grip, and I couldn’t shake it off.

My eyes scanned the crowd again and finally I found Aria. Gianna was at her side, practically holding her up. Aria looked pale and then her eyes

settled on me, and I knew she'd seen me leave with Grace. She straightened and held my gaze.

This was it. My way to get rid of the weakness that made me an easy target for Dante.

"Apologize," Matteo muttered. "For fuck's sake, Luca, apologize to her."

"No," I said firmly. "We are done."

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chapter 21

ARIA

I put on my thickest coat, a scarf and gloves before I walked out onto the terrace then down the slope toward the water. I watched the sun rise over the ocean, breathing in the cold air. I stood like that for a long time when steps sounded behind me. I turned around, expecting Gianna, but instead Matteo headed my way, dressed in only sweatpants and a shirt despite the freezing temperatures. He and I hadn't exchanged more than a few words in the last four weeks. I turned back to the water, not sure if I wanted him to disturb this moment of almost peace. I rarely slept more than a few hours at night anymore. But I owed him thanks.

Matteo stopped beside me.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "For finding the photographer even if it was in vain." Four weeks, and slowly I was starting to realize that this was it. That the love I'd taken for granted, I'd never experience again.

"Three years ago you kept a secret from Luca for me," Matteo said in a voice gravelly with sleep. "If you hadn't, I wouldn't be standing here today."

I turned toward him and tilted my face up. We'd never talked about that day in the years that followed. "I did it for Luca," I said because it was the truth and we both knew it. Merely speaking his name burned me up inside.

Matteo nodded, brown eyes searching mine. "And I found that photographer for him too because he needs you."

I smiled sadly. “The last four weeks proved you wrong. Luca lives his life like he used to. He’s free again, free to party and to take women into his bed.” God, those words tore a hole into my chest, and my throat tightened until I was sure I’d suffocate.

Until Sylvester I’d harbored a flicker of hope but I was done, done with hoping for something that was never going to happen, done with the constant hurting.

Matteo shook his head with a smirk. “He didn’t sleep with the bitch. He didn’t touch her, didn’t do anything.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Four weeks and Luca hasn’t fucked anyone, hasn’t touched a single woman, hasn’t had his cock sucked. If he was done with you, he would have fucked his way through half of New York by now, trust me. The cold-hearted bastard seems to have a heart after all, and it beats only for you. He’s just too much of a stupid fucker to show you.”

Relief filled me, but part of me wasn’t sure if it even mattered that Luca was still faithful to me. Was there hope for us? For our love? Perhaps it was too broken.

“Go to him,” Matteo said imploringly. “He is too fucking proud.”

I turned back to the ocean and didn’t say anything. I wouldn’t go to Luca. I had tried in the beginning, but he kept pushing me back even though he knew I hadn’t cheated. He needed to make a small step toward me, show me that there was still hope for us. I had to protect not only myself but also our baby.

“Luca wants you to let the Doc take a look at you because of your weight loss.”

“I didn’t think he’d noticed—after all, he never even looks at me anymore.”

Matteo frowned. “He looks, trust me.” He waited, then sighed. “Aria, can’t you just fucking apologize to him even if you don’t mean it? One of you has to make the first step.”

“I’m going to get myself a tea,” I said, leaving him standing there. If Luca was worried, he could tell me himself, and yet part of me couldn’t stop the stupid relief that he still cared for my well-being.

I stepped inside, glad for the warmth. The cold had helped with the nausea but now that I was inside, it was back. After getting out of my coat, scarf and gloves, I headed toward our kitchen and turned on the electric kettle to make myself tea. One of the maids had put the tea bags up on the top shelf again, even though I took them down every time. It drove me crazy. I grabbed a chair but hesitated; with my dizziness the risk of falling was too big. I released the chair, opened the door to the shelf and took a spatula.

I stood on my tiptoes and tried to shove the packet with teabags down from the shelf with the spatula, but I only managed to push it further back. A shadow fell over me and I shied back in surprise, then froze. Luca reached into the shelf and grabbed the packet then set it down on the counter. His face was stone, but there was a hint of something in his eyes.

I averted my gaze. “Thanks,” I said quietly.

He didn’t say anything, only nodded before he went over to the coffee maker. I allowed myself a moment to watch him. Like Matteo he wore black sweatpants, but he hadn’t bothered with a shirt. I’d never wanted to touch someone more than I did Luca now. I missed his closeness, his warmth. God, I missed his love. My eyes lingered on the tattoo on his shoulder.

I’ll go where you go no matter how dark the path

I turned away quickly, swallowing hard, and prepared my tea, wanting to get out of the kitchen as fast as possible. With my mug in one hand, I headed for the door when a new wave of nausea mixed with dizziness crashed down on me. The mug left my hand, smashing on the floor, spilling hot tea over my bare feet, but I barely registered the pain because my vision turned black and I tried to reach the table to steady myself. The floor was approaching fast when strong arms wrapped around me, hoisting me up, and my palms pressed up against a hot chest. I sucked in a breath, my forehead dropping forward against muscles. I breathed in deeply, a familiar scent, a scent of comfort and love. My vision cleared slowly.

“Aria?”

The gentle tone I missed so much. My heart seemed to mend and break at the same time.

I raised my head and looked up into Luca’s face. Worry. Was there worry? His brows drew together. God, I loved this man.

As we stared at each other, I could practically see Luca’s mask falling back in place, a mask as impenetrable as steel. Cold and hard. I must have imagined the worry. I dropped my hands from his chest and stepped back, wincing when I realized my feet had been burnt slightly.

“That should be treated with burn salve,” Luca said firmly. “I will call the Doc so he can take a look at you.”

I forced myself to take a resolute step back even as my body screamed to move closer, even as my heart screamed louder for his closeness. “I don’t need him. I’m okay.”

I need only you.

Before I could voice these words, I knelt down and began picking up the shards. When I risked a glance up, Luca was watching me with a look I

couldn’t decipher. He appeared almost angry but not quite. Suddenly he reached for me, grabbed my arm and pulled me up. “Go.”

I stared. “I need to clean this up. The maids won’t return until tomorrow.”

Luca’s eyes burnt into me. “Leave.” And his voice shook with… rage? “Just leave.”

I whirled around and left.

A few days later I was curled up on the sofa, reading a book when Gianna joined me. She nodded toward my book. “Is it any good?”

I shrugged. I had trouble focusing on anything for long. I’d read the same page twice and still didn’t know what had happened. She held out a plate with cookies.

“I tried my hand at baking.”

“You can’t bake.” Gianna wasn’t any more talented than me in the kitchen. Lily was the only one who could cook anything remotely edible, but she was spending a few days with Romero’s family. Gianna, on the other hand, was always around, a constant shadow.

“Try them,” Gianna urged.

I reached for one and took a hesitant bite, but the smell of warm dough and chocolate turned my stomach over. To think that I’d loved chocolate before my pregnancy. I quickly swallowed the bite then put the cookie back down.

“Aria, can you please stop starving yourself now?” Gianna hissed suddenly.

My eyes widened with surprise. “I’m not starving myself,” I said. “You see me eat.”

“I do, and it’s not much, and I also see you going to the toilet afterward. Come on, Luca isn’t worth getting bulimia over.”

He was worth anything.

“Do I look that bad?” I looked down at myself. I had lost weight. My body was drawing on my reserves to make sure the baby could grow, and thankfully it did. The doctor was satisfied with its growth after all.

Gianna rolled her eyes. “You’d make catwalk models jealous.”

“Sure, except for the ten inches I’m too small.”

“And then there are your clothes,” she said, gesturing at my loose-fitting blouse. “It’s like you can’t bear to show your body anymore.”

I closed my eyes. “Has Luca said anything?”

“I’m not really on speaking terms with him, as you know.”

I knew. My family was falling apart, and there was nothing I could do.

Apologize to Luca.

But I had already apologized, had begged him not to destroy our love, and he had pushed me away. Gianna’s voice tore me out of my thoughts.

“From what Matteo let slip, Luca is fucking worried. We all are, Aria. Why do you think Luca is suddenly spending half the week in the Hamptons? It’s because he wants to keep an eye on you. I don’t understand the asshole, but he obviously still cares for you in his own twisted way.”

I clenched my fingers. I’d noticed his increased presence but hadn’t dared hope it was because of me. I peered down at myself, at the almost unnoticeable swelling of my belly. How much longer would I be able to keep the pregnancy a secret? I didn’t want us to make up only because of the pregnancy. I wanted us to find our way back together on our own,

because our love was strong enough to overcome anything. But eventually I wouldn't be able to hide it anymore. I was in the twelfth week after all.

"Aria." Gianna's voice brought me back. Her face twisted with worry. "Please."

I took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

Gianna sat back, gaping. "Fuck." She glanced down at my stomach. "How far along are you?"

"Twelfth week."

Relief settled on her features. "So that's why you are sick?"

I nodded. "I guess it's my bad luck that the sickness didn't stop yet," I said with a small laugh.

"Bad luck my ass. You have the worst luck, getting yourself pregnant with Luca's child." She frowned. "I thought you were taking the pill."

"I did. But when all the drama with Lily and Romero went down, I forgot occasionally. I didn't want it to happen. Luca doesn't want children at the moment." Or ever.

Gianna leveled her gaze to my stomach and stretched out her arm but stopped a couple of inches away. "Can I touch it?"

I glanced around. We were alone. "Sure."

She put her palm against my bump, and I relaxed under her touch.

"It's still so small. Hard to believe that there is a tiny human inside."

"I know," I said, looking down at Gianna's hand against my bump and wishing it was Luca's hand. Tears gathered in my eyes.

"Oh, Aria," Gianna murmured and pulled me into a hug. "I hate to see you like this."

"I'm so lonely, Gianna. I miss him."

"You see his angry face almost every fucking day, Aria."

“I miss how he used to be with me. I miss his kisses and his touch, I miss his body beside me at night. I miss his love.” I swallowed. “I miss being held.”

Gianna patted her lap and I lowered my head in it, then she began running her fingers through my hair like she’d done when we were younger. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to relax under her touch. I still had my sisters and the baby in me. Their love would have to carry me from now on. Would it be enough? I wasn’t sure, but it would have to be. Gianna began to hum a soothing melody, and tears squeezed past my lashes. I fell in, humming a lullaby our mother had occasionally sung to us.

She fell silent and tensed under me when steps rang out, familiar steps.

I braced myself before I opened my eyes.

Luca and Matteo stood in the foyer, watching us. Luca’s face was an emotionless mask. He kept me out as he had in the last few weeks. I lifted my head from Gianna’s legs, suppressing the urge to touch my belly as I straightened. “Excuse me,” I said to Gianna and rose to my feet, then walked upstairs. Luca didn’t follow. He never did anymore.

LUCA

A low humming sound greeted us as Matteo and I entered the mansion. We followed the sound into the open living area, and my chest tightened at the sight before us. Aria lay curled up on the sofa, head in her sister’s lap, as Gianna stroked her blonde hair. Aria was crying, eyes closed, tears trailing down perfect but too pale cheeks. So fucking pale.

Gianna froze, her gaze hardening as it settled on me. She didn’t bother hiding her contempt. I didn’t give a fuck, but seeing Aria like this, that got

to me. Slowly she opened those stunning blue eyes, and as they met my gaze, hurt and despair filled them. Fuck. It was like a knife to the stomach. It was worse than that.

She sat up but her movements were off, as if she wasn't sure of her body anymore, as if something was holding her back. I couldn't say what it was, had no way of reading her because she lowered her head as she hurried past me and upstairs. She avoided me, and most of the time I was relieved because it made things easier, made it easier to ignore her, made it easier to forget the feelings only she could evoke.

When she'd broken down in the kitchen a few days back, I'd thought I'd lose it, and then when she'd gone down to her knees, looking small and hopeless, I'd wanted to crush her to my chest. She didn't belong on her knees, she wasn't supposed to look broken. She was a fucking queen among rats.

Whenever she was around, when I was forced to look into her face, I had a hard time holding back the apology that threatened to burst out of me. She had been the one who'd betrayed me in the first place, not in the way I'd accused her of, but a betrayal nevertheless. Three times she'd gone behind my back for her siblings.

Gianna jumped up from the couch and stormed toward me.

"What now?" Matteo asked her with raised hands, but she ignored him and shoved me hard. I narrowed my eyes as I looked down at her, not budging despite her vehemence. Her hands curled to fists and I could tell she had half a mind of hitting me.

Matteo must have seen it too because he gripped her wrist and muttered, "Gianna, get a grip."

"Get a grip? He's the one who needs to get a grip." She shook him off and scowled back up at me. "Can't you pull your head out of your ass for

one fucking second and apologize to Aria, you stupid asshole? You are destroying everything."

I had grown used to her insults. She had enough self-preservation to reserve them for when we were among family, and she knew I tolerated her disrespect because of Matteo, and Aria. "Apologize?" I asked in a low voice, sending her a scowl in return, but she didn't back down.

"Yes, apologize. You know she didn't cheat on you, and you treated her like dirt. You still do."

"I don't treat her like dirt."

I knew Aria hadn't cheated, but the fact remained that she had gone against me. She had taken money from the Famiglia bank account. She had gone to Chicago in a time of war, had let herself get captured by Dante. If he hadn't used her to make me lose my mind, she'd still be in his hands, and woman or not, we were at war.

Gianna shook her head, disgusted. It was a look I was used to from her. "She's fading every day, don't you see? Is your pride worth losing the one person who doesn't think you're a psychotic serial killer?"

I'd seen that Aria had lost weight, but it wasn't anywhere close to being dangerous yet. I'd asked the Doc. He had assured me that she looked healthy enough, even if he hadn't examined her in a while because she didn't want him to.

"I am a killer," I said simply.

"He is," Matteo said with a shrug, then he added in an attempt to lighten the mood, "Whether psychotic or sociopathic, that's definitely up for debate."

Gianna shook her head, then she whirled around and stomped off.

Matteo sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Your problems with Aria are making my life hell, too. I'm barely getting sex anymore, not even

angry sex, and Gianna is the best at angry sex, let me tell you."

I didn't doubt it. That woman harbored the fury of fifty hungry wildcats. She was completely intolerable, so unlike her sister. Aria hated arguments, tried to keep people together with her beautiful smile and kind words.

Fuck. The slow smile that began with a soft curl at the corners of that perfect mouth, then spread until it broke across her entire face, wide and stunning.

A fucking hole gaped in my stomach whenever I remembered her smile. She hadn't smiled in a while.

Matteo watched me silently with a too-knowing expression. "Perhaps Aria started the mess but you will be the one to end it, Luca."

"I won't apologize."

"Fine, but I'm so fucking tired of the tense mood that's been dragging us down. Not just you and Aria, but Gianna and Liliana, and me and Romero. It's annoying as fuck, and it's going to bring us all down. If you are certain that you won't apologize to Aria for accusing her of cheating and for giving her the cold shoulder, then at least end it for good. You've changed so much already in the Famiglia. Make a difference and file for a divorce, then you can return to fucking your way through New York's it-girls and Aria can find a nice guy to marry."

"No!" I growled. "Aria is mine. I'll kill every fucker who dares to touch her. There won't be a fucking divorce. Ever. And I don't want to fuck anyone…"

"But her," Matteo finished. He shrugged. "Then your balls are going to turn blue and fall off, because I don't think Aria will make the first move again."

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chapter 22

ARIA

It was already late in the morning. I hadn’t slept most of the night because I’d felt sick but also too exhausted to get out of bed. Turning around, my eyes found the empty space beside me in bed. My fingers traced the soft fabric. I still fell asleep on my side of the bed and always woke half on Luca’s empty one, as if my body tried to seek him out at night. Eight weeks of lonely nights.

I put on the loose silk bathrobe that hid my bump and made my way out of the bedroom with bare feet. The house was quiet, but distantly I heard the rumble of deep voices.

I was surprised to find Luca and Matteo still at the breakfast table. Their plates were covered in crumbs, but they were done eating and caught in an argument from the look of it. Another plate was also covered in crumbs, but Gianna had already made her exit. She and Luca in a room, that didn’t last long. She was probably in the gym. Lily and Romero had left for New York yesterday morning.

Both men looked up at me. I didn’t say anything, didn’t meet either of their gazes. I was too tired to deal with my feelings. Swallowing my nausea, I reached for the thermos with fruit tea that Marianna always prepared for me, and put it in a cup. I drank a sip of the hot fruit tea, not sitting down. I couldn’t stomach anything else in the morning right now, and I didn’t want to risk sitting down lest I had to run to the bathroom.

Luca was watching me, his eyes lingering on my cheekbones, then my collarbones. I knew he could see my bones protruding sharply. The bathrobe couldn't hide every part of me. I'd lost even more weight in the last two weeks. I was starting to get worried about the baby, but I just couldn't keep food inside. I took another sip of the tea, one hand clutching the edge of the table to steady myself. Mornings were always the worst.

"You should sit down," Matteo suggested, and his voice made me look up because it held worry.

Luca rose from his chair, took the basket with Danishes and held it out toward me. He wasn't close, never close anymore. "Marianna got your favorite almond biscotti. You need to eat."

His gray eyes were softer than I'd seen them in a long time, but I had given up hoping.

I stared down at the baked goods and felt my stomach turning over. I looked back up. His eyes were desperate. "Aria, please," he added. He almost never said "please," especially not in front of others, not even Matteo. A violent wave of sickness gripped me. I shook my head, fighting the nausea.

"I can't," I got out, then turned around and walked slowly back upstairs. Running would have made me throw up. I was glad that Luca didn't follow me anymore. It made this easier.

I threw up what little I still had in my stomach, then I brushed my teeth in a daze and washed myself with a cloth. Dizzy like this I couldn't risk going into the shower.

I walked back into the bedroom and undressed, then turned around to face the floor-length mirror.

"What are you doing to me?" I whispered affectionately. Fourteen weeks. I cupped my bump. Naked like this, there was no mistaking that I

was pregnant. I turned, facing the mirror sideways. A baby. I stroked my bump lightly, wishing it was Luca's hands, needing his touch and love so much it hurt.

The door to the bedroom opened. "Aria." It was Luca.

I whirled around, away from the mirror, and rushed toward the clothes stand where I'd left my bathrobe. I ripped it off and made the whole thing topple over. I flinched as it hit the ground before my feet, then quickly clutched the bathrobe to my naked front.

Luca stood frozen in the room, his eyes moving from the clothes rack to me clutching the bathrobe like it was my salvation.

Regret flickered on his face, but I didn't dare hope. "Aria, are you scared of me?" he asked quietly.

Was I? I regarded Luca. I had been occasionally in the days after he'd thought I'd cheated, but not anymore. He hadn't hurt me when he'd thought I'd betrayed him in the worst way possible. He would *never* hurt me.

"No," I said with conviction.

He moved toward me, movements slow and careful as not to startle me as he picked up the rack and straightened it. He looked into my eyes and the emotion in his tugged at my heartstrings. "I don't care about pain. I can deal with torture. But when I saw you with Dante, and thought that you…" He trailed off, face twisting with agony. "I wanted to kill you, and I wanted to kill myself because I knew I was too weak to do it."

What a logic.

"I'm sorry I made you think you couldn't trust me. But Luca, I love you. I would never let another man touch me, never betray you like that. Never."

"I know," he said quietly. He still didn't bridge the remaining distance between us. Perhaps because I was still shielding myself with the bathrobe

as if I was scared of what he'd do with my nakedness.

"You still love me?" he asked, his expression unguarded. He wasn't Capo in that moment; he was my husband, the man I loved and who loved me in turn.

"Of course," I said. I didn't think I could stop loving him. "And you? Do you love me?"

He laughed, a dark, raw sound. And he took a step closer, but then stopped himself. "I love you too much. It's fucking painful. It's killing me every second I'm not with you, every second of having to pretend that I don't love you. I hate to see you being sick because of me."

"I'm not sick," I protested.

He gestured at my collarbones. "You have lost so much weight, Aria. I'm not blind."

I shrugged. "It's nothing I can't handle."

"Forgive me," he got out. My eyes widened. He had never said those words before. A Capo doesn't ask for forgiveness, nor grant it. That was one of his father's lessons he had taken to heart.

His eyes weren't cold or hard or wary. He let me in. He was back. My Luca was back. I started crying. And he bridged the remaining distance. "Aria?"

I peered up at him, at the pained look. "Of course, I forgive you, if you forgive me too."

"How could I not forgive you?" He cupped my cheeks. "I love you." He bent down and kissed me softly. I had been drowning and he was my air. He was my life, my love, my everything. His kiss was sweet. No possessiveness, only love. I parted my lips and his tongue tasted me. I'd missed this. I'd missed him.

I dropped the bathrobe and pressed my hands against his chest, feeling his heartbeat. His hands trailed down from my cheeks to my shoulders, then down my back and to my ribs. So close to my bump. He pulled away.

“Your ribs,” he said quietly. “Aria, you need to eat. I won’t let you starve yourself. Let me help you.”

I smiled up at him. “There’s nothing you can do, Luca.”

He got it wrong. His face twisted with raw fear. “Are you really sick?”

“God, no,” I said quickly. I took a step back but he only looked into my face, uncomprehending, and not at the small bump. I grabbed his hand and put his palm on my belly.

The look on his face was priceless. Utter shock. Disbelief. His eyes shot down to his hand on my bump. It wasn’t big yet and looked even smaller compared to his strong hand, but it was unmistakable.

“What?” he asked, his voice breaking.

“I’m pregnant with our baby, Luca.”

Slowly his eyes rose back to mine. He didn’t say anything.

Uncertainty filled me. “I’m sorry. I forgot to take the pill when everything was a mess because of Lily’s wedding to Brasci. I know you didn’t want to bring a baby into this world. That’s why I hadn’t told you yet. And that was the reason why Dante let me leave Chicago unscathed. I was pregnant then, and I told him. I’m sorry, Luca.”

With a low sound in his throat, he knelt down, startling me, his hand still on my belly. He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against my stomach, then rested his forehead against my naked skin, breathing harshly.

I exhaled in a shudder, and of course began crying again.

He raised his gaze to mine. “Oh, Aria. I will burn down the world for you and our child. I wish I’d apologized sooner. I wish I hadn’t let you go through this alone.” He got up and kissed me lightly. I deepened the kiss

and slid my hands under his shirt and over his six-pack. I needed him, needed his closeness more than I'd ever needed anything.

He returned the kiss then pulled away. "What about the baby?"

"It's okay. We can have sex. I talked to the gynecologist." Then I hesitated. "Or don't you find me attractive with a bump?"

Luca laughed. "You are the sexiest and most beautiful woman in the world, Aria, bump or not." He lifted me into his arms and carried me over to the bed.

Luca put me down on the mattress and let his eyes take in the sight of me. "Oh fuck. You are so gorgeous, Aria."

His fingers brushed across my trimmed curls but then he paused, expression uncertain, as if he was asking for permission. I parted my legs for him. He didn't take his eyes off me as he slipped his fingers between my folds and stroked me expertly, knowing every touch and flick I enjoyed. My breathing turned ragged as I watched that strong, powerful man, my man, kneeling between my legs, his hands giving me pleasure.

He heaved a breath, expression darkening with desire as he lowered his head between my legs and my center tightened in anticipation. I gasped when I felt his tongue slide along my flesh. I was already so ready for him. It had been too long since I'd been with him. "Luca, I want you inside me."

But he didn't let himself be deterred and settled completely between my legs, his eyes on my face as his lips closed over my clit and he suckled. I cried out as my orgasm hit me, unexpected and forcefully. It had been too long, too long without his touch.

Luca groaned against my center, and the vibration made my eyes roll back, but he didn't stop his gentle assault. I relaxed under his tongue and mouth, let him guide me toward sweet oblivion as a new wave of pleasure

raced through me. After my second release, I could take no more. “Luca, please, I need you.”

Luca trailed kisses up my body, over my hip, my stomach, ribs before he lingered on my breasts, which had grown. He smirked and I let out a small laugh, which brought his attention back to my face and smile. “I missed this.”

“Sex?” I asked, feeling hot and wet and desperate for more.

“Your smile,” he murmured before he lowered his head to my breasts and began lavishing them with kisses. His mouth closed around my nipple and I moaned, feeling another release approaching. He nibbled and sucked for a while, his gray eyes on my face as I squirmed and moaned. “Luca, please.”

He straightened and tugged his shirt over his head, revealing the muscled torso I always wanted to run my hands over, but he didn’t take his eyes off me. His hands moved to his pants, which did nothing to hide the bulge beneath them, and pulled them and his briefs down. He needed this as much as I did. I shivered in anticipation as he climbed back on the bed and up my body as I opened my legs wider for him.

He supported his weight on his elbows as he lowered his mouth for another kiss. Reaching between us, he lined himself up, his tip pressed up against me. I bucked my hips so he slipped in a couple of inches and we both moaned at the sensation.

He slowly eased into me until he was almost all the way in, but I could tell he was holding back. I peered into his eyes and gripped his firm backside. “I want all of you inside me.”

The tendons in his throat flexed, his expression reflecting his turmoil. “I don’t want to hurt you or the baby.”

“Luca,” I said, tightening my hold on his ass. “You can’t. Trust me, as long as you don’t turn all out-of-control rough with me again.”

As if he remembered that day, his lips twisted with self-hatred, but I didn’t let him. I reached for the back of his head and pulled him down for a kiss, and finally he slid the rest of the way into me and we groaned as one.

“Fuck,” he rasped, pressing his forehead against mine, chest heaving. “I forgot how tight you are, how fucking perfect you feel.”

He retreated a few inches, only to slide into me again. I moaned at the sensation of fullness. His strong body over me, his length inside of me, his eyes burning into me with love and need and hunger. I felt like bursting. He thrust slowly, as if he was savoring every moment, and I could feel myself spiraling out of control, but I didn’t want to let go. I wanted this moment to last forever.

He slammed into me a bit harder, his skin covered in perspiration, his mouth set tight as he fought for control. “Aria, it’s been too long. I’m not sure how long I can last,” he said through gritted teeth.

I touched his cheek, holding his gaze.

That he had stayed faithful to me, despite who he was, despite what he’d thought I’d done at first—it meant the world to me. Perhaps it was nothing I should have been thankful for, nothing normal women were grateful for, but I knew what many Made Men did behind their wives’ backs, and they weren’t even Capo. Luca could have a new girl every day if he felt so inclined. He could have more than that.

“I’m close,” I gasped as he angled his thrusts upwards to reach my G-spot and I clutched his shoulders. My toes curled, my fingers twitched against his skin. So close.

Luca tensed and then he came with a violent shudder, and took me with him over the edge. I cried out my release, clinging to his shoulders as he

slammed into me a few more times before his forehead collapsed on the pillow, his breathing harsh against my throat. He still kept his weight off me, probably worried he'd crush the baby.

I wanted to relish in this moment forever, in the feel of his warmth and power, listening to his rapid breathing, but my body had a mind of its own, and obviously intended to eject whatever small amount of fruit tea had remained in my stomach. "Luca," I pressed out, already fighting off the rising sickness.

His head snapped up, brows crinkling with worry. He pushed off me at once and slid off the bed. The moment I was free to move, I scrambled off the bed and rushed toward the bathroom. I barely managed to reach the toilet before I threw up my tea. Shivering and feeling faint, I sank down to my knees.

LUCA

For a moment I wasn't sure what to do when Aria fled into the bathroom, but then I moved to follow. I heard her throw up, yet when I entered the room, she knelt on the ground, trembling, her fingers lying limply in her lap and her blonde hair curtaining her face. She looked small and vulnerable, and fierce protectiveness flooded me. My eyes lingered on the small bump as I moved toward her and flushed the toilet. Aria carried our baby. How could she ever consider that I didn't find her attractive with her bump? She was the most beautiful woman on this planet. The love of my life, and I had almost lost her, given her up. I was a fucking fool.

I took a washcloth out of the cupboard and held it under warm water for a couple of minutes before I returned to Aria, crouched beside her and held

it out to her. She took the cloth with an embarrassed “thanks,” then wiped her pale face. She didn’t have to be embarrassed; I had seen so much worse in my life than a pregnant woman throwing up. I rubbed her back gently, worry filling me as I felt her spine protruding too sharply. “*Principessa*, we should let the Doc take a look at you.”

She tilted her head up, perspiration glistening on her forehead. “But he isn’t even a gynecologist, Luca. I doubt he could help.”

Perhaps she was right. The Doc could patch up knife and bullet wounds faster than anyone I knew, but he usually didn’t deliver babies. “Who’s your gynecologist?”

“Dr. Max Brightley,” she said, and possessiveness reared its ugly head. She had a male gynecologist? The idea that any man saw Aria like that drove me up the walls with jealousy.

Soft laughter bubbled out of Aria, her pale cheeks flushing. “Oh Luca, don’t tell me you are jealous of my doctor?”

“You know I’m a possessive bastard. Why does that still surprise you?”

She shook her head. “Can you help me stand?”

I straightened and lifted her to her feet, supporting her weight. She swayed lightly. “We’re going to that Dr. Max now. I want to have a word with him.”

“Luca,” Aria chided. “I won’t go if it’s only so you can intimidate my doctor.”

“Not only to intimidate. I also want to know why he isn’t capable of stopping you from losing weight.”

“Some things can’t be changed, Luca. Pregnancy isn’t something you can influence. You have to trust in my body.”

I trusted Aria, and I loved her body, but it was obvious that she needed help. I was used to finding a solution to problems, and if I wasn’t able to

find a solution myself, I forced people to find one for me—and I was going to make Dr. Brightley see what kind of man he was messing with.

“I need a shower but I’m worried I’ll faint,” Aria said. I led her toward the shower, then turned on the water and waited until it turned warm before I gently led Aria inside and took the shampoo. I squirted a small amount on my palm, but Aria shook her head. “That’s not enough.”

“That’s double of what I’m using,” I said.

Her eyes darted up to my short hair. “If I had short hair like yours, I’d need less shampoo as well.”

“No,” I said with more force than intended.

She rolled her eyes but I could tell that she still didn’t feel well. I doubled the shampoo amount and began massaging it into Aria’s hair. I loved her blonde strands, but cleaning them was a hell of a bother. In the time it took to get every trace of shampoo out, I would have been dressed and on my way to the doctor, but I enjoyed touching her like that. Aria closed her eyes as the warm water streamed down her face, and again my eyes slid lower to the proof of her pregnancy. “How far along are you?”

“Fourteen weeks,” Aria murmured as she glanced up at me. I turned off the water and grabbed a towel. A pregnancy took nine months; that was pretty much all I knew. I wrapped her in it then lifted her out of the shower, careful not to hit her head on the glass.

“I can still walk,” she said with a smile, but I carried her back into the bedroom and set her down on the bench in front of our bed. I took my time drying her, enjoying the feel of her soft skin as my fingertips brushed over it. To think that I had denied myself this for so long.

“Do you know what it is?” I asked, trying to keep my voice relaxed even if the thought that Aria had found out without me at her side felt like a stab to the heart.

“No,” she said softly, raking her fingers through my wet hair. “It’s probably still too soon and I didn’t want to know. I’d hoped we could find out together.” Her voice broke, and I pressed my forehead against her bare thigh. She smelled faintly of vanilla and Aria’s very own clean sweetness.

“We will. I will be there for you every step of the way from now on, I swear.”

I felt Aria nod and when I looked up, she was crying again. “Aria,” I said in a pained voice. “Why are you crying again?”

I hated to see her tears. They made me feel like a monster because I knew I was the reason.

“I’m being emotional because of the hormones, Luca, that’s all.” She tried a smile but it came off shaky. “The due date is in July.”

Five and a half months to go. Suddenly, images of my own father popped up, uninvited and unpleasant. I had few good memories of the man. Matteo and I had definitely never loved him. He hadn’t been what anyone would consider a good father, not even in our world. How was I supposed to be a father to our child? Aria, she was a natural caretaker, but I was a destroyer, a killer.

Those thoughts tormented me as I helped Aria get dressed. She chanced the occasional glance at me, obviously picking up on my mood. Insecurity filled her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me, *principessa*,” I told her, linking our fingers.

She gave a hesitant nod. “You don’t look happy.”

“I’m happy that you are pregnant, Aria, trust me,” I said firmly. I raised our linked hands and kissed her palm. “How could I not be happy about a small version of you?”

Her expression relaxed. “It could be a boy, then it would be a small version of you.”

My stomach tightened. I knew Made Men, especially a Capo, were supposed to produce an heir, but I didn't want a son. With a son the chances that I'd act like my father to make the boy strong were too great. I didn't want to become like him. Again Aria picked up on my hesitation, and frowned at me. Fuck. She knew me too well.

"You want a girl?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes," I said without hesitation. There was no sense in pretending I didn't care about the gender.

She searched my face as if the answers to her questions were hidden there. "Are you worried you won't be able to love a son like a daughter?"

"I'll love our child no matter the gender because it's your flesh and blood, Aria. But with a boy, I'd need to think of his future." I didn't say more, didn't want to elaborate. There was no use in discussing this when we didn't even know if it was a boy.

"We should head out now," I said, tugging her along. My grip on her tightened when she swayed again, and I pulled her against me as I led her out of our bedroom and downstairs. The first floor was deserted. Matteo had probably gone in search of Gianna.

"Does Gianna know about your pregnancy?" I asked as I led Aria toward my new black Mercedes G-Class parked in the driveway. I'd bought it to distract myself. Of course it hadn't worked.

"She and Lily…" She trailed off, biting her lip.

"And Romero," I finished.

Worry filled her face. "I needed to involve him so he could guard me when I went to the gynecologist. I knew you would have hated it if I'd gone there without protection, and I couldn't ask Sandro. He would have told you right away."

I nodded as I held the door open for her. I'd have to have a talk with Romero anyway. She slipped in, but not without another worried look. "Don't be mad at him. He helped me a lot. I don't know what I would have done without him."

I stifled my anger. It wasn't directed at Aria, not even at Romero. She shouldn't have been forced to rely on Romero in the first place. I closed the door, walked around the hood and climbed behind the steering wheel.

Aria fell asleep during the drive back to New York and I let her. She looked exhausted. With her shirtdress, her bump wasn't noticeable, and yet my eyes kept returning to the spot.

After I'd parked the car in a loading zone, I woke Aria. She sat up, startled. Her eyes took in our surroundings. "Are we already in Manhattan?"

"You slept through the ride," I told her.

"Sorry." She peered out of the window. "Are you sure we won't get towed?"

"Yes," I said. I got out, catching the eye of the restaurant owner whose loading zone I was barring. He recognized me. He paid us for protection.

I helped Aria out of the car and took her hand. She stiffened her spine, holding her head high. This was the public. Aria knew what was expected of both of us. We could always be followed by paparazzi. Usually my contacts checked in with me before photos got published, but I preferred not to have compromising photos in the first place. The Dante/Aria fiasco had been bad enough, and still made my blood boil.

"I hope Dr. Brightley has time for us," Aria said as I followed her toward a building with several doctors for all kind of medical problems. That way at least people wouldn't suspect Aria was pregnant. I didn't want word to get out so soon, and if possible never. We were at war and children

were too vulnerable. It was bad enough that Dante knew about the pregnancy, but I needed to keep it a secret from our other enemies, and that meant we would have to make sure there was never a press photo of Aria pregnant or with our child. I'd move heaven and earth to guarantee their safety.

When we stepped into the reception area of the practice, the eyes of the receptionist snapped toward us, widening when she took me in. Of course she knew me. I darted a look toward the closed door of the waiting room to our right. I wasn't keen on other patients seeing us here and spreading rumors. We stepped toward the reception.

"Mrs. Vitiello, we didn't expect you today," the receptionist piped up.

"I reckon that won't be a problem," I said with a closed-lipped smile that always had the same effect on people. Aria's cheeks turned red.

The receptionist blinked up at me, then quickly looked away, paling. "Uhh, of course. I'll just have to check with Dr. Brightley first. We have quite a few patients in the waiting room. Perhaps you can sit down until I call you."

"No," I said. "You certainly understand that I don't want to draw attention to my wife and me. I trust you'll honor our wish for secrecy." The smile got wider but my eyes narrowed.

She nodded and waved at another woman who was dressed in a bluish nurse's uniform. "Can you please take Mr. and Mrs. Vitiello to a treatment room?"

After one glance at me, the nurse scurried off and opened a door for us. We stepped through and she closed the door behind us, giving us privacy. Aria turned to me with an exasperated expression. "Luca, did you have to be so…" She waved a hand in my direction as if that said it all.

"So?" I echoed.

“So dominant,” she finished before she sank down on one of the two chairs in front of a white desk. The other furniture in the room was the chair that no man ever wanted to see close up with its strange metallic leg holders, and a pallet with an ultrasound machine beside it.

I cocked an eyebrow.

Aria shook her head. “Never mind.”

I moved to her side but didn’t sit down. My surroundings made me prefer to stand.

“Luca,” she began. “Dr. Brightley is very upfront. I don’t want you to take it the wrong way and act all Capo.”

I didn’t get a chance to reply because the door opened and a tall figure stepped in, a woman with short brown hair and glasses. Dr. Brightley, her name tag read. I sent Aria a look, and she smiled innocently. The doctor approached me without hesitation or initial shock. Her receptionists must have warned her. I accepted her outstretched hand, surprised by her firm grip. If she’d been a man, I would have answered with my own version of a strong grip. “I’m Dr. Brightley, and you must be the elusive father, Mr. Vitiello.” Her words were clipped, her smile disapproving.

I gave her a tight smile. “You must be the doctor incapable of helping my wife,” I said in a deadly voice.

Aria rose from her chair and stepped up to us to shake Dr. Brightley’s hand. “What he means is that I still can’t keep any food in me.”

Dr. Brightley frowned, her eyes checking Aria from head to toe. “Have you lost weight since the last time we saw each other?”

Aria nodded. “Not much.”

“You are underweight, Mrs. Vitiello,” she said with a sigh before she leveled her gaze on me. “Sadly, my options are limited. I could give your wife an infusion to improve her nutrient supply but apart from that, there’s

little I can do.” She turned back to Aria. “Your sickness could be related to emotional stress, have you considered that?”

Aria blanched, and I tensed. Had Aria talked to the doctor about our personal problems? Her eyes met mine and she gave a small shake of her head to tell me she hadn’t. The doctor must have based her assumption on me missing the previous appointments. Regret left a bitter taste in my mouth. I met the doctor’s gaze, my face a mask of calm. It wasn’t her business what went on behind closed doors.

“I don’t think it’s that,” Aria said quietly but firmly. She took my hand and I squeezed lightly in return. “We wanted to find out the sex of our baby today, if possible?”

Dr. Brightley nodded. “Please unbutton your dress and lie down on the bench. I can’t promise you anything since it’s still early.”

When the doctor began the ultrasound, I felt fucking nervous. I held Aria’s hand but my eyes were focused on the ultrasound screen. I didn’t see much at first, only unidentifiable shapes in gray and black which shifted constantly, but then suddenly a face became distinguishable. A perfect little face. Nose, ears, lips. Next the doctor showed us the hands, ten tiny fingers, and feet. I couldn’t believe a fully formed human, our child, was inside Aria. The doctor zoomed in on the area between the child’s legs and smiled. “I can’t be entirely sure until later in the pregnancy, but it looks like a girl.”

I almost sagged with relief. A girl. A little version of Aria. Not a boy who would harbor my darkness, a darkness I would have to encourage to help him survive in the Famiglia.

Aria squeezed my hand and I turned to her. She smiled. I gave her a small nod, feeling the eyes of the doctor on me. “It would be good if your wife got as much relaxation as possible. The baby is still growing but if she keeps losing weight, we might have to admit her to the hospital to be safe.”

I gave a terse nod. “She will gain weight, don’t worry.”

We headed to our penthouse after the appointment. Aria was too tired for the hour-long drive back to the Hamptons, and I had a feeling she wanted to return to our apartment. She had spent almost all of her time in the Hamptons over the last few weeks.

I could tell how happy she was to be back as she strode out onto the rooftop and let her gaze glide over the skyline. I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist, still stunned by her bump. “How about we order sushi and lounge on the couch?”

She gave me a look. “Sushi? Aren’t your forgetting something?” She rested her hand over mine.

I didn’t get it.

She laughed. “Men are so clueless. I’m not allowed to eat raw fish or raw meat, and it’s best not to order anything uncooked in case the restaurant doesn’t wash their products enough.”

“If I told them to wash them, they would, trust me,” I said. If something happened to Aria or our daughter because anyone messed up, I’d show them that monsters walked the Earth.

“I know.” She turned around in my embrace, touching my cheek. “My big bad mobster.”

I choked on a laugh. Aria was the only one who would joke about it. I leaned down, making my voice the deadly whisper I used when people displeased me. “I am bad, and worse, I am Capo.”

Aria shivered but definitely not from fear. She wrapped her arms around my middle and pressed her face against my chest. “God, I missed this.”

I stroked her silky hair then followed her spine down to the soft swell of her ass. She shivered again and moved even closer.

“You need to eat,” I said, even if my cock had other plans. She nodded, but didn’t move. “How about pasta? That can’t be bad for the baby, right?”

“Gnocchi à la Genovese for me,” she said without hesitation. “And perhaps one of those delicious almond cakes. You are ordering at Da Daniele’s?”

I smiled. “Of course.”

Forty minutes later we settled on the couch in the living area with our ordered food, Aria in one of my white shirts, and I in only gray sweatpants and a shirt. I opened the boxes and spooned a small heap of gnocchi on Aria’s plate. “Do you want a bite of my ossobuco?”

She eyed the meat then quickly shook her head. “I don’t think I can eat it.”

I held her plate out to her and she took it and settled back against the couch, her bare legs tugged under her body. She smelled her food hesitantly. Watching her, I dug into my own dish.

Aria picked up the fork and took a bite of her gnocchi, then smiled. “It seems okay.”

I was finished with my main course, the focaccia and the tapenade before Aria had even eaten half of her plate and the box was still half full of gnocchi. Feeling my gaze on her, she glanced up. “You don’t have to watch me. I can eat.” She smiled to soften her words.

“Not enough,” I said. I stroked her knee. “Come on, *principessa*. Don’t make me force-feed you.”

She sighed. “I’m worried I’ll get sick if I eat too fast.”

“Perhaps you need to stop worrying about it.” I paused. “Was the doctor right? Did you feel sick because of our fight?”

Aria swallowed another bite before she put down the plate on her lap. “I don’t know. Perhaps? You are the most important person in my life. You are the father of our baby girl and I couldn’t confide in you for so long. It hurt, hurt worse than anything ever had.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. Remorse still was a strange sensation, unfamiliar in my body.

“It was my fault, too, Luca. I should have realized how you’d take my going to Chicago without your permission. As you said, I know what kind of man you are.”

“A possessive, controlling asshole?” And that wasn’t even the worst of my character traits, but Aria knew, *she knew* and loved me despite it all.

“Yes,” she said with a small smile. “And the man I love with all my heart.” She touched the spot over my heart. “Mine.”

“Only yours. *Always.”*

She brought another bite of gnocchi to her lips and ate it. Her voice became very soft when she spoke again. “Did you ever waver?”

“Waver?”

“Grace. Or other women.”

Her shoulders were tense.

“No,” I said firmly. “All I could think of was your smile.” And it was the fucking truth. I was completely whipped when it came to Aria.

“And you?” I couldn’t keep the growl out of my voice.

Aria actually threw her head back and laughed her bell-like laugh. She took another bite then filled her plate with the rest of her dish. “I wouldn’t even know how to flirt with a man, Luca. You are the only man I can

imagine being close to. It's like your possessiveness flipped a switch in my brain and made me incapable of tolerating any other man's closeness."

I smirked, and Aria huffed. She took another bite. I had to stifle a smile. She didn't even notice how much she was eating.

I reached for the remote control and turned on the stereo. Soft music began playing from the speakers, and then a deep male voice started singing. Aria's eyes flashed with recognition; it was her favorite album by Rag'n'Bone Man. She beamed, that fucking perfect slow smile taking over her gorgeous face. How had I gone eight weeks without it? Without her?

She put down her plate, regarding me, seriousness banishing her smile. "Promise me we won't ever fight again for so long. I don't think I can survive it again."

I opened my arms and she climbed on my lap, wrapping my neck in a tight embrace. "I promise, and you promise me to never go behind my back again, no matter what it is. You going to Chicago alone, it was suicidal."

"I know," she said quietly. "It was because of Fabi. He called me the night you left for New York."

It was betrayal. If Dante found out, he would have to put Fabi down.

Aria's voice shook as she continued, "My father is cruel to him. He is beating Fabi, and I'm so worried he will do worse. I wanted to help him. That's all."

I got it. Aria couldn't help herself. But Fabi was an initiate. He would experience, *and do* worse than a beating. "Did you see him?"

She shook her head. "I failed him."

"He wouldn't have come to New York with you. He is loyal to the Outfit." Aria swallowed hard. I stroked her back, wanting to set her at ease. She had been upset for too long. "Fabi is strong. He won't have any trouble surviving in the Outfit."

And if he wasn’t strong enough, I hoped Aria would never find out.

“Can’t there be peace again?” Aria begged me with her eyes, but this was something I couldn’t give her.

“As long as I am Capo, there won’t be peace with Dante Cavallaro.” Not after the fucking photo incident.

“Dante didn’t hurt me. He wouldn’t.”

I grew tense, old anger rekindling, but I shoved it down. “He is Capo, and we are at war. Next time he gets his hands on you, he won’t let you go, trust me. You are the leverage he and the Outfit need against me. He’s under as much fire as me.” I didn’t mention that he’d been the one who was responsible for the photos. It wouldn’t serve any other purpose than to upset Aria further, and in her state she didn’t need any more stress than she’d already suffered.

Worry flickered in her eyes. “Is your family still going against you? Gianna told me you killed one of your uncles on the night you saw the photos of me and Dante.”

“I did, crushed his throat in front of the gathered Underbosses and Captains.” I didn’t mention that I killed Ermano and Angelo as well, and the fucking bikers, and the Outfit fuckers who had come too close to our borders and gotten caught. I’d sent them back to Dante in several packets. I’d killed *so many* in the past few weeks.

Aria released a slow breath. “And then you saw me with Dante.”

“I lost it, Aria. I fucking lost it.”

She kissed me. “How could you ever think I’d cheat on you with Dante?”

I ran my hand over her smooth calf and Aria’s lashes fluttered. There were shadows under her eyes. I began massaging her calves, feeling her relax under my touch. Then her eyes opened slowly. “Promise me you will

never hit our daughter. I know many men in our world think it's the only way to discipline children."

"Aria," I said fiercely. "Many men in our world think a husband should discipline his wife the same way, and I never raised a hand against you and I won't. And I fucking swear on everything that matters to me in this world that I won't ever hurt our daughter."

The bing of her mobile made her jump and she slanted a glance toward the screen, which rested on the table. Gianna, of course.

Aria sighed, then reached for her phone and typed a quick reply before she turned off the sound and returned it to the table.

"What did you tell her?"

"That I'm in New York with you."

"That's all? You know she won't stop bugging us until you tell her every little detail," I murmured, leaning forward and running my lips over her delicate throat.

"I turned off the sound."

"As if that's going to stop her," I said, and as if on cue my phone began ringing. "Matteo." I didn't even have to look at the screen. Gianna had probably ordered him to check on her sister.

Aria shook her head with a soft smile. "She's worried about me. I gave her a lot of reason to be worried."

And I was the fucking reason.

My phone didn't stop ringing.

Aria leaned back to give me a look. "They won't give up."

With a groan, I reached for my own phone and took Matteo's call. "I'm busy," I muttered.

"Busy in a good way or bad way?" Matteo asked. I could hear Gianna's high-pitched bickering in the background.

“I’m not sure what you consider a good way,” I said as I motioned for Aria to lie back. She did without hesitation and I began rubbing her calves and feet. Her face softened even more, and my black-as-tar heart softened in turn at the sight.

“Luca,” Matteo said with a hint of strain in his voice. Gianna must have been grating on his nerves the last few weeks. He was even more volatile than usual, but who was I to talk?

“Is Aria with you?”

“Yes,” I said, as I applied pressure on the sole of Aria’s foot with my thumb, eliciting a soft moan from her.

“For fuck’s sake, Luca, just tell me if she’s okay.”

“She is okay, Matteo. She and I, we figured things out.”

“Thank the fucking Lord.” Gianna spoke in the background again. “Let me talk to him,” Matteo said to her, then to me, “When will you come back?”

“Tomorrow, but only to pick up a few things. Aria will stay in New York with me from now on.”

Aria looked at me then, and I could tell she was pleased.

“Okay,” Matteo said slowly.

I hung up, fed up with Gianna’s voice in the background, wishing I could turn off the sound of my mobile as well, but as Capo that was a fucking no go.

“Will you tell Matteo about the pregnancy?” Aria asked, biting her lip.

“Yes, tomorrow. I need his help upping your protection.”

“Up my protection?” Aria asked. I lifted one foot and pressed a kiss to her ankle. “Oh yes,” I murmured.

Aria didn’t protest. She let out a yawn and smiled embarrassedly. “I’m sorry. I haven’t slept well without you.”

“Me neither,” I admitted. I’d lost count of the times I’d woken at night, reached for her and freaked because she hadn’t been there until I remembered why.

I pushed off the sofa and lifted Aria against my chest. Her arms came around my neck and she pressed her cheek against my shoulder, releasing a small sigh.

“We’re going to bed. You need to rest.”

I carried her up the stairs, through our bedroom and into the bathroom, setting her down in front of the wash table. She shook her head. “I’m pregnant, not immobile.”

My eyes moved down to the bump hidden beneath my shirt. I’d stop at nothing to protect Aria and our daughter. She watched me then nodded. “You won’t budge on the matter.”

“I won’t.”

I helped her out of my shirt and she pulled a nightgown over her head, which showed the hint of her belly. The sight made me fucking happy, which surprised me. I’d never really considered having kids. It had been an abstract concept.

As we got ready for bed, I couldn’t stop admiring her. She washed her face and tensed a moment before her fingers clutched the edge. I grabbed her waist at once. “Aria?”

“Dizzy,” she said apologetically. I lifted her up into my arms and carried her over to our bed, where I laid her down and stretched out beside her, pulling her close. She snuggled against my body, fingers clinging tightly to my biceps as if she was afraid I’d leave if she let me go. She kissed my chest before her eyes rose to mine. I cupped her cheek and she gave me that smile that warmed my cold heart every time.

She fell asleep within a couple of minutes of being in my arms, but I lay awake and listened to her rhythmic breathing for a long time, not because I couldn't fall asleep but because I didn't want to. The feeling of Aria in my arms was the best. I carefully moved my hand down until it rested over Aria's stomach. If I were still capable of that kind of thing, maybe this would have been the moment I cried, but the last time that had happened was when I saw my mother in her own blood after she'd slit her wrists, and it wouldn't happen again. Yet my chest felt tight with emotion.

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chapter 23

LUCA

The next day we returned to the Hamptons to pick up a few clothes Aria needed. She'd stay in New York with me from now on. I wanted her close, and I was needed in New York.

When we stepped into the mansion, Gianna and Matteo sat at the dining table, having breakfast. It was close to lunchtime so they'd probably slept in late, or rather fucked in late as usual. Gianna jumped up from her chair and hurried over to us. I released Aria. Before Gianna hugged her sister, she sent me a scathing look. "Are you okay? Did the brute treat you all right?"

I tensed. Did she fucking suggest I'd mistreated Aria? Even when I'd thought she'd fucked Dante, I hadn't laid a hand on her. I'd killed and tortured people for far less. Aria gave me an apologetic look before I headed toward Matteo while she and her sister moved to the seating area and sat down.

Matteo clapped my shoulder. "Did you finally pull your head out of your ass?"

My eyes remained on Aria. I had trouble letting her out of my sight now that I had her back, now that I knew how vulnerable she was.

"What's the matter with you? I thought you settled your fight."

"We did." I turned to Matteo, who was watching me cautiously. "Aria is pregnant with my child."

Matteo’s eyes widened, his gaze swiveling to Aria then back to me. “You’re going to be a father?”

Could he have sounded any more shocked? I glared, then focused on Aria, who was placating Gianna from the looks of it.

“Maybe that was one of the reasons Dante let her go and chose the photo tactic to weaken you.”

I nodded. “Maybe. If I ever get my hands on him, I’ll ask him if he wanted me to kill my own wife.”

“He knew you wouldn’t kill her. He probably thought you’d risk a headless attack on his territory, on him, so he could kill you.”

I didn’t know Dante’s motives, but I’d give him an excruciating death if I ever caught him.

“How do you feel about becoming a father?”

I shrugged. “Our father wasn’t a role model.”

“No, that’s for sure,” Matteo muttered. We exchanged a long look. Our childhood had been a fucking ordeal. If we hadn’t had each other, we would have gone dipshit crazy.

“It’s a girl. It’ll make things easier,” I added.

Matteo smirked. “If she’s as beautiful as Aria, then we’ll have our hands full keeping men away.”

My lips curled into a hard smile. “Let them come.”

Matteo laughed, excitement flaring in his eyes at the prospect of blood, then he quieted and searched my eyes. In the first weeks after I’d received the photos of Dante and Aria, after I’d gone down the deep end and slaughtered the bikers, and more after that, he’d been worried. “I’m glad you didn’t go completely batshit crazy.”

I touched his shoulder. “That would have been your chance to become Capo.”

Matteo was alpha like me. He hated being told what to do, hated having to bow down to anyone. It had led to more than one torture session from our father. Yet he'd never used my moments of weakness to better his position.

"That you had my back rather than shoved a fucking knife into it, even though I gave you plenty of opportunity, Matteo—that I will never forget."

Matteo gave a nod, then his mouth twisted in his annoying grin. "I can see the pregnancy hormones have already rubbed off on you."

"Don't hold your breath for sappy emotional outbursts, asshole."

Matteo punched my stomach, but I tightened my muscles before the impact and didn't make a sound. "I know you reserve those only for Aria."

My eyes went over to Aria. She looked up and as always warmth settled in my body.

Matteo and Gianna had returned to New York with us two days ago. I knew it was because Matteo wanted to keep an eye on me and because Gianna wanted to keep an eye on her sister, but I honestly couldn't care less why they had made their decision. Romero and Lily had been in New York already, because as a new Captain his presence was required, and Lily had to help Romero's mother who had broken her leg. Aria was happy having her family around again. She and her sisters sat on the couch, browsing through baby magazines that Lily had brought.

As long as I didn't have a second bodyguard for her, I wouldn't let her leave the apartment unless I was with her.

"Maybe I can take over a few shifts," Romero suggested.

I shook my head. I'd settled things with him and I would have preferred him to guard Aria again, but that was no longer an option. "You are Captain

now, and you are a husband. That changes things."

Romero's eyes darted toward Lily, and I knew I couldn't let him watch Aria. His priorities had shifted, and knowing the impact of love, I knew no threats would make him choose Aria's life over Lily's if it ever came down to it.

"What do you think of Demetrio?" I asked.

"He's a good fighter, loyal, and unattached. There's only the Famiglia for him," Romero said, and his mouth set tight with guilt.

"He got Angelo for us, didn't blink when you killed Gottardo."

Demetrio had hated his father and his half-brothers. As a bastard son, he'd suffered living with them. He was grateful I had killed them.

"I'm considering making him Underboss of Washington if he proves himself."

"The added incentive will definitely help," Matteo said.

Romero nodded but didn't look convinced. "He's still young."

"Twenty. You weren't much older when you started guarding Aria."

"Do you trust him with Aria?" Matteo asked.

My eyes moved to my wife, who was smiling at her sisters, her palm pressed against her belly.

"No. But I don't have many options. I can't guard her all the time. And I know Demetrio's weakness. I will use it to keep him in line if I have to."

Demetrio stepped into our gym, eyes cautious as they settled on Matteo and me. He usually worked with Orfeo, the son of one of my Captains, and it was obvious that he was wary of my reasons for calling him here. He was

one of the few family members I could stand, though being a bastard he wasn't even officially considered family. He had always been a loyal asset.

"Luca, Matteo," he said carefully, stopping a few steps from us. His eyes took in my clothes with a frown. I had already changed into sweatpants, nothing else. No sense in getting blood on a shirt.

His gaze moved to the boxing ring behind me and tension filled his body. He was tall, Matteo's height, but a couple of inches shorter than I, and not as muscled but that was a given.

I could see caution and a hint of worry in his eyes, but he didn't reach for his gun or try to run. "You called for me?" His voice was firm and he met my gaze straight on.

I nodded, and took a step closer to him. He didn't back off. "You've proven your loyalty in the last few years, and I'm considering making you Underboss of Washington."

His eyes registered surprise. Washington was one of the most important cities in my territory and he was only the bastard son of my uncle Gottardo, not someone who was meant to inherit his father's title—but he was someone who had never given me reason for distrust. Usually he would have become Captain, no more.

"It's an honor," he said. "What do I need to do to prove my worth?" Still caution and wariness.

"You will guard my wife over the next year."

Demetrio's eyes widened. "What about Sandro?"

"He will be second guard, but I want someone as deadly as you when I'm not around. Let's see if I'm right that you are the best choice."

I nodded at Matteo.

He pulled his knife and gave his shark-grin. "You should get your knife out as well. I will try not to kill you."

Demetrio removed his jacket and unsheathed a long curved knife, then held it out at chest level as he faced off with Matteo.

Matteo lunged. Knives clanged. Demetrio held his own but Matteo wasn't out for the kill, of course. Yet, I was happy with what I saw.

"Enough," I said. "Now you will fight me."

Demetrio wiped blood from a cut in his cheek, then eyed me warily.

"Without weapons," I said.

He dropped the knife and I attacked. I landed a few hard hits against his sides, stomach and face, but he got me a few times too, not enough to bring me to my knees but it was better than nothing. Eventually, I grabbed his throat and wrenched him to the ground, then dug my knee into his chest. I eased my hold on his throat enough for him to breathe then brought my face close. "Aria is my wife. She is mine."

He swallowed, a hint of anger in his dark eyes. "I would never do anything, I swear."

"I don't have to tell you what I'll do if you touch her."

"Everyone knows she's off-limits, Luca," he ground out. "I'm not insane. And no offense, but she isn't my type."

Matteo laughed. "Demetrio, you've got a dick. She is your type. I'm Luca's brother and even I can admit that I like what I see."

I sent Matteo a look. He shrugged.

Demetrio shook his head. "She is beautiful," he admitted and my fingers twitched. "But I prefer outsiders. They aren't as restrained as our women."

I tilted my head. I'd thought the same way before Aria, but I was happy with his reaction. I couldn't detect a lie. "You will guard her with your life."

"She will be safe with me," he said firmly. I believed it too, but I'd have still preferred Romero, would always prefer him. Still, he was now Captain and I couldn't ask him to step down from that position, and his feelings for

Lily made him too volatile. If he had to choose between Aria and Lily, the choice was clear.

I released Demetrio and straightened, then held out my hand for him. He took it and I pulled him to his feet and clapped his shoulder, then lowered my voice threateningly. “Orfeo is like your brother, and his family has always been closer than your own.”

I left the rest unsaid, that if he messed up, Orfeo would be the one to pay the price.

Demetrio stiffened. “You can trust me with your wife, Luca. I swear it by my honor.” He touched his tattoo.

“I don’t trust anyone, but you will prove yourself.”

“I will. Is there a reason why Sandro isn’t enough anymore?” he asked carefully.

“She is pregnant,” I said, even though my body bristled at admitting it.

Demetrio nodded, but I could see the hint of apprehension in his expression. Good, he knew what kind of responsibility I gave him. “She will be safe.”

“If you are suspicious of someone, disable first then ask questions. I’d rather deal with the fallout of killing one too soon than one too late, understood?”

Demetrio gave another nod. “Will you make it public?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want people to know until there’s no way around it, and even then only Famiglia. I don’t want photos of Aria’s pregnancy or our child in the press. If you notice a photographer, get them, or at least their name, and I will deal with them. Dante knows already. We have to prevent the Bratva or the Camorra from finding out. Understood?”

I’d caught the hint of surprise on his face when I mentioned Dante knew, but I didn’t bother explaining. “Understood,” he said.

I gave him another hard look before I said, “I will introduce you to my wife tomorrow.”

Demetrio inclined his head.

ARIA

Luca had always been protective. I was used to it by now. But since he’d found out about my pregnancy his protectiveness had reached a new level. He barely let me out of his sight and he definitely didn’t leave me alone with Sandro. I knew he’d found a new bodyguard for me and it was obvious that the idea didn’t sit well with Sandro, but he and I had never really gotten along well. Romero had been like a friend, and even brother, but Sandro was always only my guard.

Luca went over to the elevator when it began its ascent, but I stayed back against the kitchen counter. The doors slid open and a tall young man stepped forward. He shook Luca’s hand then followed him toward me, eyes appraising me carefully. I remembered the sharp onyx eyes and black hair.

“This is my cousin, Demetrio,” Luca said. He was a bastard son. I’d heard people whisper about it and I had hated it. I’d seen him several times over the years, the first time at my wedding, He had been a teenager then, a couple of years younger than me. He must have been twenty, twenty-one now? He inclined his head respectfully and I smiled and walked toward him, extending my hand. Demetrio glanced at Luca, and I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. But really, I was used to this kind of behavior from Luca’s soldiers by now. Luca noticed my reaction and smirked.

I didn’t wait for his okay and took Demetrio’s hand, and shook it. I tried to remember when I’d last seen him, probably at some family function or

perhaps even the funeral of Luca's father. "Nice to see you again, Demetrio. Last time was at Salvatore's funeral?"

He shook his head, hand stiff in mine. "No, last time was three years ago when Luca beat me up in the gym for suggesting I fight you."

My eyes widened and I laughed as I released him. "Oh well. I suppose that's a day you don't like to remember." He had changed a lot since then. He definitely didn't look like a boy anymore, and there was nothing insecure about him. He had hardened like all Made Men did eventually.

"No," he said. "It was a lesson I needed to learn."

Luca watched his cousin with sharp eyes. I could tell he didn't trust him like he trusted Romero, but if Luca had chosen Demetrio I knew I was safe with him.

"I'm looking forward to getting to know you," I told him.

Surprise flashed across his face before he masked it.

"Why don't you stay for dinner?"

His dark eyes moved to Luca, who nodded. "Aria prefers to know her bodyguards." I stifled my annoyance about Demetrio's need to get Luca's approval.

Matteo and Gianna joined us as well. Demetrio was tense throughout dinner but he was polite and not too intimidating, so I felt comfortable enough in his presence.

That night as Luca and I lay in bed, I asked, "Why him?"

"He's proven his worth over and over again in the last few years. My uncle Gottardo, his father, was a worthless piece of shit, but Demetrio is a loyal soldier. I want to test him."

“Test him?”

“I need an Underboss for Washington, and I want to give the job to him.” He stroked my hair. “And he’s deadly. He’s got no real attachments. His mother is dead, and he isn’t married or anything.”

“So you think he won’t have trouble putting his life down for me,” I said.

Luca smiled darkly. “He won’t hesitate to die for you, trust me, because if something happens to you while you’re under his watch, I’ll set a new record.”

I shivered at the undercurrent in his tone. “Record,” I echoed, though I had a feeling I knew.

Luca shook his head and kissed me sweetly, eyes softening. “Nothing will happen to you or our baby, trust me.”

“You can’t lock me in, Luca. I still want to work the books. I need to do something. These last few weeks without anything to do were hell.”

He sighed. “When you start showing, we need to keep you out of the public eye as much as possible, or at least make sure you won’t be recognizable.”

“I can get another wig,” I teased.

Luca chuckled. “That might be an option, yes.” His fingers on my waist became more and more distracting.

“What do you think about turning the small guest room into the nursery?”

“Not the big one?”

“It’s downstairs.”

He gave a tense nod. “Our daughter needs to be close to us, you are right.” He closed his eyes briefly. “How am I going to protect you and her both?”

I ran my fingers over his Famiglia tattoo. “Nothing will happen to us.”

He relaxed slightly but a hint of tension remained. I sat up and Luca’s eyes narrowed in confusion. I trailed my hands down over his firm stomach to the waistband of his briefs. I hadn’t gone down on him since we’d made up, worried my nausea would flare up if he accidentally hit the back of my throat, and that wasn’t something I wanted to happen.

He hardened immediately and desire flashed in his eyes. Yet he said, “Aria, you don’t have to do this.”

I dragged down his briefs and his cock sprang free. “You don’t want my mouth on you?”

He made a strange sound deep in his throat, half laugh, half groan. “I’m close to coming just having your face near my cock.”

I laughed, and he grinned, then tensed as I leaned down and took his tip into my mouth and twirled my tongue around him. His taste tightened my center with arousal—no sign of nausea. Encouraged by my body’s reaction, I slid more of his length into my mouth and hollowed my cheeks, establishing a slow rhythm.

Luca moaned, a low sound that made wetness pool between my legs. He watched me through half-closed eyes, shoulders flexing as he fisted the blankets. I took special care of his tip the way he liked it and cupped his balls.

“Aria,” he rasped. “Fuck, this feels so good.”

He tightened and I sucked him harder, enjoying the way his body tensed and his breathing turned ragged. I tasted the first hints of his cum but before he could release into my mouth, Luca pushed me back gently and came all over his stomach as his cock twitched.

I kept massaging his balls then moved on to stroke his muscled thighs. “Why did you do that?” I asked curiously.

Luca gave me a sated smile. “I didn’t want to risk you getting sick.”

I snorted. “I wouldn’t have thrown up on you.” Then I added, “I *think*. I feel pretty decent.” And it was true. My nausea was almost completely gone since Luca had returned into my life.

“I didn’t want to risk it,” he said in a low voice, then cleaned himself with a tissue before he reached for my arm and pulled me closer. “Sit on my stomach.”

I straddled him as he’d asked, and he brought his legs up so I could lean against them before he drew my legs out from under me and parted them, laying me bare to his hungry gaze.

I shivered as his eyes took their time appraising me.

“So wet because I had my cock in your mouth,” he growled, and I trembled with arousal, parting my legs a bit wider.

I enjoyed giving Luca pleasure. It made me feel powerful, but it wasn’t just that. I loved how he let loose when I pleasured him with my mouth. It was a beautiful sight.

He trailed his palms up my legs and his fingertips stroked the sensitive skin of my inner thigh, but he didn’t touch me where I needed it, only watched me intently as I squirmed on top of him. “Please,” I gasped.

His finger graced the outer edge of my folds. “Are you begging me? Begging for release?”

“Yes,” I said harshly.

“Don’t you know that begging doesn’t work with me?” he asked darkly, and I almost came hearing his voice.

“Luca, please.”

“Please what?”

I narrowed my eyes but his gaze was dominant and possessive, and my core tightened. “Please touch me, I beg you.”

He slid two fingers into me excruciatingly slowly, and his mouth parted as he watched me. I came hard before he was even halfway in, bending backwards against his knees, whimpering and half-delirious with relief.

Luca moved his fingers in a gentle rhythm as I rode out my orgasm, his eyes moving from my center up to my face.

I rocked my pelvis lightly as he slid in and out slowly, curling his fingers deep inside of me. He pressed his thumb against my clit and thrust harder into me, and I cried out again, unable to hold back my release, but Luca still didn't ease up. His fingers kept up their sweet torture and I came again, slumping forwards, palms pressed against his chest, panting and perspiring. Luca's gray eyes held mine.

"I don't think I can come again," I rasped, feeling almost faint.

"Relax, *principessa*. Give it a moment. We need to make up for lost time."

I leaned back against his legs again, and he kept fucking me with his fingers slowly, without a rush. His stomach was slick from my arousal and his movements made embarrassingly wet sounds. I whimpered and his gaze became impossibly more possessive. It took a long time, but eventually my walls tightened almost painfully and another release rocked through me.

Luca sat up, claiming my mouth, and I held on to him. "Amazing," he whispered as his lips grazed my tender throat, and all I could do was nod.

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chapter 24

ARIA

I rolled over onto Luca's side of the bed. It still smelled of him, and my heart swelled. Luca had left before sunrise to drive to Washington DC to see if the current Underboss was in control of the situation after Gottardo's death, but he'd be back tonight. I forced myself to get out of bed because I was actually hungry. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been hungry in the morning.

When I came down into the kitchen, Demetrio was already sitting at the bar counter, reading something on his mobile, but he rose the moment he saw me.

"I'm not the queen," I said with a laugh. "You don't have to get up."

He eyed me a moment, then sat back down. He was different from Romero. He wasn't as approachable. I took a tea and a banana, and leaned against the counter across from him. I could see that he wasn't sure how to handle me. I could only imagine what Luca had told him.

"How long have you been a Made Man?" I asked him, cradling my cup and blowing on it to cool it down.

"Five, no six years now. Got inducted on my fourteenth birthday."

"And now you are stuck being my bodyguard," I said curiously. "I bet you wouldn't have chosen the job."

He shrugged, but I could tell that I'd hit a nerve. Of course, he'd never say it. "I do what Luca asks me to do. And that he allows me to guard his

wife is an honor. It shows me that he puts great trust in me."

"That's true," I said. Especially since Demetrio wasn't only protecting me, but also our baby. "And you won't be my bodyguard forever. I hear you are going to become Underboss."

Demetrio shook his head. "That's not determined yet. Only if I prove myself. And even then…" He grimaced.

I tilted my head. "Luca doesn't care that your father wasn't married to your mother."

"Others do. She was his affair," he said with a bitter twist of his mouth.

I'd heard she'd killed herself because of the affair, but I couldn't ask him for details. I had no right to pry.

I nodded. "Many won't like to see you rising in ranks. They are the ones you shouldn't care about."

Demetrio's eyes flickered with acknowledgement as if he was starting to see me as a human being, not only a thing he had to protect.

LUCA

Aria was stretched out on the lounge chair on the roof terrace enjoying the first warm days of spring. Her belly protruded unmistakably now, and she was confined to the penthouse most days because of it. So far hardly anyone knew about her pregnancy except for the closest family and a few loyal soldiers.

I had absolutely no intention of changing that. Dante and his family had disappeared completely from the public eye since Valentina had given birth to their son six months ago. Except for a few minor attacks on Pittsburgh

and the photo fiasco, Dante had lain low, perhaps because of his children or because he was planning something big.

“What’s wrong?” Aria asked quietly, watching me standing in the doorway to the roof terrace.

I shook my head and moved toward her. “Nothing.”

She frowned but didn’t push the matter. I sank down beside her and she shifted a bit to give me space. “You don’t have to carry your worries alone, Luca. Being pregnant doesn’t make me breakable.”

I smiled darkly. She was breakable, vulnerable. She was where my enemies would aim if I gave them a chance, and I had so many enemies, not in the Famiglia anymore, not since my last few cleanings, but there were still enough enemies left. Matteo and I, along with my men, had gone on so many killing sprees in the last few months, I could hardly get rid of the pink tinge on my skin anymore. But for every enemy I killed, a new one seemed to surface.

Aria tensed and I did the same in turn. Her hand shot out, grabbing mine and pressing my palm against her belly, and that’s when I felt it – a kick.

I closed my eyes because it still seemed impossible that I would become a father, that Aria was carrying our baby.

“Have you thought about names?” Aria whispered, and I opened my eyes, still dry, always dry.

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. “My grandmother was called Marcella.”

Aria’s blonde eyebrows rose. “The female version of Mars, the god of war?”

I leaned down and kissed Aria’s stomach, then her lips. “Our daughter will be strong. She won’t bow down to a husband. She won’t ever have to fear a man, that I swear.”

“Marcella,” Aria said thickly, and that look in her eyes got me every time, still after almost five years. It would always get me.

My cell ruined the moment and I groaned. Couldn’t my soldiers deal with one fucking thing without me? But when I glanced down at the screen and saw Orazio’s name, I picked up at once and stood. “What’s the matter?” It wasn’t time for his monthly report, and if he felt the need to call that was a fucking bad sign.

“Dante was contacted by Benedetto Falcone.”

“What?” I growled.

Aria sat up, eyes wide, and I turned my back to her. “When?”

“A couple of days ago. Falcone seems to be looking for support. He’s growing weaker. Many of his men are starting to resent his sadistic and unpredictable ways. He wants to forge a truce with the Outfit.”

If that happened, this war would reach New York and not just the outer borders.

“What did Cavallaro say?”

“He doesn’t trust Falcone and refused a meeting.”

“Will he change his mind?”

“He might, but I doubt it. I also heard a rumor from one of my contacts in England. A rumor about Falcone’s son.”

“Son?” I remembered dimly that the head of the Camorra had several sons, but that was all I knew. I hadn’t bothered with the Camorra.

“His oldest son Remo. He’s seventeen, and has disappeared with his brothers from the boarding school they attended. I don’t think it’s public knowledge in Las Vegas yet. Falcone might be eager to keep it hush-hush.”

“Why?”

“Because Remo Falcone supposedly wants to kill his father and take over the West.”

“Do I need to worry about him?”

“I don’t know, but from what I hear he’s spent the holidays killing for his father and the rest of the time for fun. His brothers may have attended that school but Remo, he’s a born and bred killer.”

As if I needed another worry added to my list. “If he’s busy killing his father, he won’t cause troubles elsewhere, I presume.”

“Maybe. But if a new Capo arises in Las Vegas, they might return to old strength, if he manages to unite the underbosses of the West.”

“I will consider doing something about the Camorra, but for now I don’t want to give them more reason to work with the Outfit.”

“Understood.”

“Keep your ears and eyes open, Orazio.”

“Will do.”

He hung up and when I turned, Aria was close behind, her palm against her stomach and worry on her face. I forced a smile. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

She tilted her head with a knowing look.

Matteo and I were on our way out of the Sphere and back home to our wives when a young man at the bar with dark hair caught my attention. He held himself with a certain air of self-assurance and barely restrained violence. His dark eyes locked on mine and he didn’t look away. He was a teenager, but his eyes revealed that he had seen and done more than most grown men. I stopped and so did Matteo.

“Do you know him?” I asked in a low voice, reaching for my Beretta.

Matteo shook his head, also reaching beneath his jacket.

The guy smiled a fucking twisted smile and rose. Scars littered his arms and one crossed his eyebrow. With a last challenging glance, he left my club. Matteo and I followed and the moment we stepped out I pulled my gun, my eyes searching the dark street for a sign of him.

“Luca Vitiello,” came a voice out of the dark.

I aimed my gun in that direction. “Step forward,” I ordered.

And he did, holding up his hands with that same twisted smile on his face. He didn’t show fear. I nodded at Matteo, who lunged and grabbed the guy’s arm and pressed his knife against his throat. The guy didn’t try to defend himself, didn’t even flinch, only stared into my eyes, and I took my own knife out. We’d see how long he’d hold up that twisted smile. Matteo dragged him deeper into the dark and I moved very close to the crazy fucker.

“Tape?” I asked Matteo.

He shook his head.

“I won’t scream,” the crazy fucker said.

“We will see,” I said quietly. “Who are you?”

His smile widened, and I lost my shit. I grabbed his arm and brought my knife down. Matteo clamped his hand over the guy’s mouth, but he didn’t need to. The guy shuddered but made no sound, and I wasn’t entirely sure if he didn’t enjoy the pain. A challenge.

Matteo gave me a look as he dropped his hand from the guy’s mouth.

“Who are you?” I growled.

“Remo Falcone.”

Fuck. “And what, pray tell, are you doing in my territory?”

“Looking for alliance. I’m going to kill my father and all his men and take over Vegas, and you can either be my ally or my enemy—it’s up to you.”

Matteo snorted. “To think there’s someone who’s more crazy than you and I.”

I gave Remo my coldest smile. “How about I kill you now?”

“Then my brother will have to hurt your wife.”

I gripped his throat. “What did you just say?”

“Your penthouse is well guarded,” he pressed out. “There isn’t a good shooting position even for the best shooter from any of the surrounding buildings, except for one. There is one window in a nearby skyscraper that allows a clear shot if someone’s leaning on the banister of your rooftop. It’s a difficult shot. Few men could hit a target from that distance. Few men could have figured out that one spot. Luckily one of those men is my brother Nino, a true genius. And your beautiful wife is leaning against that banister right as we speak.”

I dropped my hand from his throat, my stomach clenching tightly. Matteo met my gaze, lowering his knife.

“What do you want?” I said with barely controlled rage. I focused on it because the other emotions would weaken me, and I had a feeling Remo knew how to use weaknesses.

“Only your attention,” he said. “I have no intention of hurting your wife.” He brought the cut on his arm to his lips and sucked the blood away. “I want you to stay out of my fight, and I don’t want you to help my father no matter what he offers you. I will be Capo soon, and then I want you to remember this day,” he said, lips and teeth covered with his own blood.

Crazy and dangerous.

He took a step back.

“I thought you wanted to know if I was ally or enemy?”

He tilted his head. “I think you might need more time to think it through. Perhaps one day we can do what should have been done a long

time ago: destroy the Outfit and split their territory between us. When my father contacts you, remember that I could have killed your beautiful wife and didn't, Luca. I don't care for your territory, but I want what's mine, and I will do anything to get it." He walked backwards slowly and disappeared in the shadows, and then the engine of a bike roared up.

I ripped my mobile out of my back pocket and called Aria.

The moment she picked up, I hissed, "Get inside now!"

She sucked in a breath but I heard movement. "Luca, what's going on?"

"Where are you?" I asked, already running toward my car. Matteo was close behind, talking to Demetrio and ordering him to send out every available soldier to look for Nino and Remo Falcone.

"In the living room. Demetrio is letting down the shutters. What's going on?"

"Stay inside."

I hung up, my pulse racing with fury and fear alike.

"What the fuck was that?" Matteo muttered.

"A warning," I growled. The Camorra had never been in my focus. That would change now.

The moment I stepped into the penthouse, Aria came running and I clutched her to my body. Orfeo had joined Demetrio. She looked confused and scared. "What's going on? Nobody's telling me anything."

"False alarm," I assured her, and she frowned.

I kissed her forehead then moved to Orfeo. "Find someone who's been a sniper. I want to find that spot." Orfeo nodded and rushed off.

We didn't find the spot until a letter was taped to the door of the Sphere two days later with directions. I wasn't sure what kind of game Remo Falcone was playing, but I couldn't risk a fight with him as well. Dante and

the Outfit needed to stay in my focus. I couldn’t deal with the Camorra on top of that.

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chapter 25

ARIA

I was starting to count down the days to my due date. I felt like a rhino, and finding a comfortable position at night was near impossible. I propped my hip up against the kitchen counter; even standing was a bother now.

Luca came into the kitchen and kissed my lips. “How are you?”

He’d been almost constantly at my side, ever since the incident that prompted Demetrio to let down our shutters and shove me away from the windows. Luca hadn’t shared details with me, but it must have worried him to the very core because Matteo had handled the majority of business in the weeks after. Only in the last two weeks had Luca started to relax a little.

“Hungry.” I always was. Where in the beginning food had been a struggle, now eating was all I could do. Luckily, I hadn’t gained much weight. I thanked my good genes.

Luca touched my belly. “And how is she?”

I put my hand over his. “She’s very active. Doesn’t allow me much sleep at night.”

“I know. Soon the pregnancy is over.”

“I doubt we’ll sleep better then.”

Luca stroked my belly with his thumb.

Steps rang out, and he straightened and pulled his hand away a moment before Demetrio rounded the corner, then froze. “Will you be staying home today?”

Luca couldn’t show this type of gentleness in front of his men. At least he didn’t hide his feelings as much when Matteo was around.

“No,” Luca said. “I have to meet with the Captains.”

I touched my fingertips briefly to his chest over his heart and tattoo. *Be careful.* My eyes told him, and he knew. He gave me a brief, possessive kiss before he left.

Grabbing a book, I headed outside into the garden of the mansion, Demetrio trailing after me. Gianna and Lily were already sunbathing in the late June sun but I couldn’t stand heat in my state for long. I missed New York, but after the incident Luca had insisted I stay in our mansion. However, now that my due date was approaching I’d have to return to New York in the next couple of days, since that’s where the hospital Luca had chosen was.

I managed to maneuver my body out of my dress and sank down into one of the sun chairs with a groan. My bikini bottoms were hidden by my belly, and for a moment I wondered if I’d put them on the right way.

Gianna lifted her sunglasses and exchanged an amused look with Lily.

“Wait till you’re pregnant and can’t move anymore,” I muttered as I stretched out, groaning again.

“I have absolutely no intention of getting pregnant, trust me. Neither Matteo nor I want kids.”

Lily bit her lip. “I’d love to have children with Romero, but we’ll wait a few years until I’m a bit older.”

I’d never thought I’d become a mother at twenty-three either, but now I was happy.

Gianna looked over at Demetrio, who sat at the garden table in the shade. “Aren’t you warm in that outfit?”

He was wearing a long-sleeved black shirt and black jeans, and looked up in confusion. “I’m not here to enjoy myself.”

Gianna snorted. “Heaven forbid anyone have fun around here.”

I laughed. “Leave him alone.”

Demetrio gave me a grateful smile, then returned to letting his gaze wander over the premises. I fell asleep with the sun on my face but eventually woke because Marcella kicked up a storm. I blinked against the sunlight. “What time is it?”

“No clue,” Gianna said, lowering a book she’d been reading. I glanced out toward the ocean, wondering if we’d manage to go back to Italy next year. These last few weeks of being confined to the mansion made me long for the vast expanse of the sea.

“When was the last time you were outside?” Gianna asked, regarding me with worry.

“I’m outside right now.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Romero said it’s for the best that Aria’s pregnancy stays a secret even if people speculate that Aria’s had a mental breakdown being married to Luca.”

I slanted her a look. “What?”

Lily grimaced. “Because you’ve disappeared from the public in the last four months. There’s a rumor that you are in rehab or a psychiatric facility, and another that Luca’s locking you in because you are simply too beautiful and he can’t stand others looking at you.”

“What kind of crap,” Gianna muttered. “That sounds like a rumor Matteo might spread just to be funny.”

I closed my eyes, laughing softly. “I think I prefer the too beautiful rumor to the nutcase one.” Then I looked down at my protruding belly.

“Even if I don’t feel very beautiful right now.”

“Once you’ve pushed that kid out of you, you’ll have your old body back in no time,” Gianna said.

“At least Luca isn’t getting a pouch out of solidarity,” Lily said with a grin. “I read that many men gain more weight during pregnancy than their wives. It’s called solidarity pregnancy or something like that.”

“That’s taking solidarity a bit too far,” Luca said from behind me, and I let out a startled cry, looking over my shoulder. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, and was only in his swim trunks.

Solidarity pregnancy? No, that definitely hadn’t happened to Luca. He was as ripped as always, all muscle, no fat.

Matteo came up behind his brother, grinning, and patted Luca’s six-pack. “I think I can feel a tiny bulge.”

“The only bulge I’ll ever have is in my pants, and you will keep your hands off it.”

“Stop talking about bulges, will you?” Gianna muttered. Matteo leaned over her; he too was dressed only in swim trunks. “Why? You love my bulge.”

“Okay,” I said, my nose wrinkling, and tried to get into a sitting position. A beetle on its back had more range of motion than me. Luca held out his hand, a smirk playing around his mouth, but in his eyes was something fierce and protective as usual when I displayed my current vulnerability.

Sighing, I let him pull me to my feet. I touched his muscled stomach. “I almost wish you’d gained weight, then I wouldn’t feel quite so ginormous.”

Luca leaned down, hand on my belly. “Aria, don’t be ridiculous. You are beautiful and still small.” I was about to protest but his gaze silenced me.

I couldn’t find a comfortable position. The pain in my lower back had been getting worse in the last week, and tonight it was particularly bad. I repositioned the nursing pillow under my belly then closed my eyes, trying to find sleep. It was only ten but I was tired all the time now. I still had five days to go before my official due date, but time seemed to drag now that the birth drew nearer.

I must have dozed off, when a sharp pain in my lower abdomen jerked me awake. My eyes flew open, and I gasped. I propped my arm up to push myself into a sitting position, but with the pain it proved twice as difficult. When I’d finally managed to perch on the edge of the mattress, I had to catch my breath. I wasn’t sure if this was it. From the force of the pain, I could only assume I was having contractions.

I caressed my stomach, waiting for the pain to subside before I reached for my mobile on the nightstand. I considered calling Luca, but I knew he had a meeting with his soldiers tonight regarding a strategy to burn down the Bratva’s labs and probably more he wasn’t telling me about. I didn’t want to disturb him if this proved to be a false alarm. I hesitated, then decided to send him a message. *When will you be home?*

I managed to send it off before another contraction rendered me a wheezing mess. Clutching the mattress, I tried to breathe through the pain. It wasn’t working as well as I’d hoped. “Demetrio!” I called when I found my voice. I pushed myself off the bed and crept toward the door, my phone clutched in one hand. It vibrated. I slanted a look at the screen.

Two hours. You okay?

I reached the door, and held on to the handle for a couple of heartbeats before I managed to open it. “Demetrio!”

He appeared on the staircase, hair mussed up and face sleepy. He must have fallen asleep. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course not, or I wouldn’t have called you,” I muttered, then felt bad for taking my pain out on him, but another contraction stopped me from apologizing.

Demetrio’s eyes widened. “Are you…?”

“Get Gianna,” I ordered, when it became clear that Demetrio didn’t have a clue what to do. Demetrio ran toward the elevator and jabbed the button, but without the code he wouldn’t be able to send the elevator to Matteo’s apartment. Did I have to do everything alone?

I held on to the banister, intent on going down the staircase to assist him in his futile endeavor, but halfway down I had to stop to breathe again.

My cell vibrated again.

Aria? Are you okay?

I was clutching the phone so tightly, I was surprised it hadn’t turned to dust yet. “Call Matteo,” I told Demetrio through gritted teeth.

I didn’t check to see if he followed my order, but a few minutes later the elevator binged and Gianna rushed out, dressed in a bathrobe, and followed by Matteo in boxers and a T-shirt.

Gianna practically flew up the steps and stopped beside me. She froze with her hands almost touching me. “Aria? What’s wrong? Is the baby on its way?”

I swallowed a retort, and nodded.

“Come on, we need to get you to a hospital,” she said, resting her hand lightly on my arm.

Matteo hovered on the first step and behind him stood Demetrio, all of them watching me as if they needed my guidance.

“I don’t think I can walk right now,” I got out.

Gianna paled.

“Do something. You must know what to do,” Matteo told her, taking another step closer.

“Why would I know what to do? Because I’m a woman?” Gianna hissed. “I’ve never pushed a baby out of my vagina, as you very well know.”

Oh God. I really didn’t need their bickering now.

“Matteo, can you please help me?” I whispered. Gianna wasn’t strong enough to carry me, and I had a feeling I wouldn’t be able to walk much longer. This was going way faster than I’d thought.

He came up immediately. “What do you need me to do?”

Another contraction and I rocked forward, clutching Matteo’s arms. He steadied me. “Call Luca.”

“You need to let go of me,” he said in a tense voice. No way. I needed something to hold on to, and Matteo could take my grip better than Gianna. I clutched his arms harder and he seemed to realize that I wasn’t going to release him.

Gianna pulled her own cell out. “Yes, it’s Aria,” was the first thing she said. Of course Luca knew it was because of me when Gianna called him. My text had probably sent him into a panic attack.

“We’ll take her to the hospital.” She nodded, then ended the call and looked at me. “He’s already on his way.”

“Can you walk?” Matteo asked.

I gave a small nod, feeling a tiny bit stronger. I took a step down, Matteo’s grip tight on my arm. It took what felt like forever to descend the

remaining steps with Gianna, Demetrio and Matteo watching me like I was a bomb about to detonate.

Gianna's phone rang. "No, we're still at home. Aria is too slow."

I scowled at her. Slow? I was surprised I could walk at all the way my insides seemed to be torn to pieces. I paused to catch my breath. Matteo surprised me by wrapping his arm around my shoulder and slipping his other under my legs before lifting me in his arms. I knew it couldn't have been easy for him. I'd gained almost thirty pounds during the pregnancy. I was still not big, but definitely not a lightweight anymore.

"Thanks," I murmured.

His dark eyes softened. Matteo and I had had our conflicts, but I knew he'd get me safely to the hospital.

"Everything will be all right," Gianna assured me. It would have been more convincing if she didn't look like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"I'll get the car," Demetrio said then disappeared in the elevator. He looked as if the devil was after him.

"Hey!" Matteo called, but the doors had already closed and it was heading down, leaving us stranded in the penthouse until the elevator returned. "What the fuck is he doing?"

Gianna jabbed the button of the elevator repeatedly, but it was still on its way down to the underground garage. "What the fuck is he getting the car for? It's parked right beside the elevator doors anyway. Idiot."

"He's nervous," I said quietly, enjoying a moment of almost no pain but then another contraction stiffened my spine and I cried out, arching in Matteo's hold. He staggered and tensed.

"Fuck," he snarled, and Gianna hit the button again, as if violence ever made a technical device work faster.

“Will you be able to keep the baby in until we’re in the hospital?” Matteo asked worriedly.

I rolled my eyes. He made it sound as if I could shut the door down there. “I don’t know.”

“Finally!” Gianna exclaimed as the elevator arrived on our floor and the doors slid open, and my heart skipped a beat in relief. Luca towered inside and his worried gray eyes zoomed in on me. Without a word, he strode toward Matteo and took me from his brother. Luca held me against his chest as if I weighed nothing. He lowered his face and kissed me gently before he headed for the elevator. I could feel his heartbeat racing, but his face was calm and it soothed my own worries. With him at my side, everything would be okay.

“Where’s Demetrio?” Matteo asked.

“Sent him to the hospital to make sure it’s safe,” Luca said, his eyes never leaving my face, and I held his gaze because the pain seemed more bearable like that. Matteo opened the door of his Porsche Cayenne for us but when Luca was about to set me down on the backseat, the strongest contraction rocked through my body. I convulsed, my eyes closing, and I released a small cry.

“You are strong, Aria,” Luca murmured against my forehead. “And I’m here for you. I wish I could take the pain from you.”

I peered up at him through half-lowered lids. I breathed in and out, seeking solace in his gentle eyes. Upon feeling me relax, Luca put me down on the backseat, then climbed in behind me, so I was resting against his chest. Matteo and Gianna sat in the front, and Matteo drove his car like a madman.

We arrived at the hospital with the baby still inside, but I was rushed into the delivery room at once. “Give her something for the pain,” Luca

barked the moment the first doctor crossed our path. I only heard something like *too late* before another wave of pain blacked out everything else.

Luca brushed my hand with his lips as I clung to him through every contraction. I didn't find time to catch my breath between them anymore, and I was at the maximum of what I could endure.

Luca's brows were drawn together, his expression almost desperate. He scowled at the nurses. "Do something," he snarled.

"One last push," the midwife encouraged.

I didn't think I had the energy for another push but then through the fog of agony, a cry sounded. My baby. My daughter.

Luca's eyes shot down to my face then lower.

I sagged with relief as the midwife held up a small human being covered in blood. For a moment, Luca didn't move, then he kissed my cheek and temple, wonder on his face, and I let out a disbelieving laugh. The midwife did a quick checkup before she put our daughter in my arms.

Luca released my hand so I could hold her. I stroked her sticky black hair. She had a lot of it, as coal black as her father's. I smiled up at Luca, who watched our child with a frozen look on his face. "She's got your hair," I whispered as I breathed in her scent, trying to memorize it. Her eyes were still bluish-gray. It was hard to say which color really.

"She's so small," Luca said quietly. He made no move to touch her. He seemed almost afraid to do so. Perhaps the doctor and midwife who were still in a room with us held him back from showing his affection, but it hadn't stopped him from being affectionate to me.

"Marcella," he murmured, and tears stung in my eyes at the tenderness in his voice as he called our baby girl by her name for the first time.

"Do you want to hold her?"

Luca's eyes darted from Marcella to me, then he swallowed. "No."

I frowned, heart clenching at his refusal. “Why not?”

He held up his strong hands with their scars as if that would answer my question. “She’s pure and breakable. I—”

“You won’t break her if that’s what you’re worried about,” I said softly, but he shook his head and cupped my cheek. “You hold her. It’s beautiful.”

I gave a small nod, stifling my disappointment. Leaning forward, I brushed my lips over his. “I love you.”

Luca glanced at the doctor, who was writing something down in the corner of the room. I touched his hand to show him I understood that he couldn’t say it back with someone else in the room. I knew he loved me, loved Marcella and me both, no words needed.

Luca didn’t leave our side as we were taken to a private room after I’d been stitched up. Shortly after we’d settled in, Gianna and Matteo came in. I was tired and wanted to rest after the exhausting birth, but they’d waited a long time and I wanted to give them the chance to see Marcella.

Gianna came toward the bed to hug me gently while Matteo wrapped his brother in a hug. “I can’t believe you’re a father now,” Matteo said with a grin.

Luca nodded as if he couldn’t believe it either, his eyes returning to Marcella, who was sleeping in the crib beside my bed. He looked almost lost. I wasn’t sure what to do to help him.

I gestured toward the crib. “Why don’t you hold her, Gianna?”

Gianna straightened but she didn’t reach for Marcella. “You know I’m not good with kids,” she said hesitantly.

I couldn’t believe them. Luca didn’t want to hold our daughter, and now Gianna didn’t want to hold her niece either.

Matteo let out a sigh and stepped up to the crib. Luca rocked forward as if he was about to stop his brother, but then he froze. Matteo must have seen it too, but he ignored it. He slipped his hand under Marcella as I sat up in the bed. “Make sure to support her neck. She can’t hold her head up yet.”

Matteo raised his eyes. Perhaps he’d thought I’d stop him, but Matteo and I had been getting along very well in the last few months. I didn’t trust him like I trusted Luca. Not even close, but I knew he’d protect Marcella. And then he lifted her out of her crib and her eyes peeled open, some spittle dripping down her lips and on his shirt sleeve. He didn’t seem to mind.

“It’s a miracle humankind survived with how fragile and useless our newborns are,” Matteo mused as he looked down at my daughter.

“That’s because we make sure nobody gets the chance to hurt them. I think Marcella will be well protected,” I said, meeting Luca’s gaze. Fierce protectiveness reflected in his eyes.

Luca and Matteo exchanged a look that caused Gianna to roll her eyes, but I smiled. If anyone ever so much as considered hurting Marcella, I wanted them to be met with Luca’s and Matteo’s full wrath.

LUCA

Marcella had my hair. Whenever I’d imagined our daughter, she’d looked like Aria—blonde hair, blue eyes. I hadn’t considered that part of me would be so obviously reflected in her. I hadn’t considered that she’d have anything of me. Aria was pure and kind and beautiful. There weren’t many

good qualities I could offer. But Marcella was gorgeous with her black hair. Pure perfection like her mother.

The moment I'd seen her I'd been in love, and seeing Aria with Marcella, I loved my beautiful wife even more. Both of them were my life. The light in my darkness, and I knew I'd ruin it if I touched Marcella. She was fragile. I'd never seen fingers and toes that small. I'd break her. I'd pollute her with my darkness.

Matteo held her without those reservations. He had as much blood on his hands as I, was as twisted and cruel, but he held her, held my daughter. I'd wanted to stop him, didn't want his killer hands on my innocent daughter, but Aria's expression had prevented me, and now I had to stand by as my brother rocked my daughter in his arms. I knew I'd never have to worry about Marcella when Matteo was around. He would defend her. He'd kill and maim and burn to defend her – like I would. We both had our demons, but protecting our loved one—that was one of the very few positive character traits we had.

Aria's gaze burnt a hole in my chest. She wanted me to be the one to hold Marcella. She gave me a reassuring smile, then yawned. She was pale, had lost a lot of blood. "It's time for you to go. Aria needs rest," I said.

Matteo lowered Marcella into her crib before he went over to Aria and hugged her, followed by Gianna. Then they slipped out, leaving us alone.

"You don't have to stay," Aria whispered.

I stalked toward her, slipped out of my shoes and climbed into bed with her. It was a tight fit, even with Aria's body snuggled up against me. She winced when she moved and I was careful not to hurt her as I wrapped my arms around her. "I'll stay," I said firmly. She rested her palm over my heart as she often did. Sometimes I wondered if it was to reassure herself that I

had a beating heart. I covered her hand with mine and she released a breath. “Whenever you are at my side, I know everything will be okay.”

“Sleep, *principessa*. I will protect you.”

“And Marcella,” she added, half-asleep.

“You and Marcella both, till my death.”

Her breathing evened out, and I allowed my own eyes to close. I wouldn’t sleep of course. This wasn’t our penthouse or our mansion. Romero and Matteo would make sure there were men guarding the corridors, but I needed to be vigilant as well. Whoever wanted to hurt my wife and daughter, would have to go through me.

The next day Aria was released. The doctors probably wanted us gone so they wouldn’t have to deal with armed guards anymore. I had seen how terrified they were of us. Everyone knew what we were. I didn’t give a fuck. I was glad to have Aria back in our penthouse where she and Marcella were safer than out in a public hospital, especially since I’d bought the offices in the building across from our roof terrace and stationed a sniper on the top.

Aria wasn’t allowed to carry anything heavy yet since she was still in pain, so Matteo had to carry Marcella in her carrier. Aria didn’t comment, but Matteo was fucking mocking me with his eyes. I knew he’d chew my ear off later.

And I was right. The moment Aria and Gianna had settled on the sofa, and Marcella was asleep in her crib beside them, Matteo cornered me in the kitchen as I was about to prepare coffee for us.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Luca?” he muttered, getting right in my face. I glanced toward our wives but they were deep in conversation.

“Stay out of my business.” I pressed the button of the coffee maker.

Matteo shook his head. “She’s your daughter. Why won’t you touch her? Even I can tell that it’s killing Aria to see you acting like a total jackass.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Our father was a sadistic asshole, not a role model of what it means to be a good father. I’m like him in so many regards —who’s to say I won’t be a shitty father as well?”

Matteo laughed. Fucking laughed in my face. “Fuck. Listen to you talking bullshit. You are nothing like our father where it matters. He raped and beat our mother. *You* cut your own arm because you didn’t want to force Aria on your wedding night. You treat her like a queen, and you will treat your daughter like a princess. Now stop the bullshit, Luca.”

“For fuck’s sake, Matteo, you make it sound like I’m a saint. You *know* me.”

“Saint, sinner, as if I give a fuck.” Matteo sneered. “I know you. I know you like to kill, you like to spill blood as much as I do. I know you enjoy slicing up our enemies and traitors. I know you like to be feared. You like their screams and their begging. You are a sick fucker like me, but you are a sick fucker who loves his wife and his daughter, and who would rather spill his own blood and slice his own limbs off than harm them.”

I shoved the full coffee cup toward Matteo without a word, and took a gulp from my own black coffee. I didn’t think I’d live to see the day that Matteo was the voice of reason from us both. I didn’t like it one bit. “We’ll see how you’ll handle becoming a father.”

Matteo shook his head. “Gianna and I don’t want kids right now, perhaps never.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise but didn’t get the chance to ask him about it because Romero and Lily arrived for lunch.

After greeting Aria and taking a look at Marcella, Romero came over to Matteo and me, gripping my hand with a smile. “Congrats. Your daughter is beautiful.”

She was, beautiful like Aria.

Aria glanced up and met my gaze, her lips turning up at the corners.

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chapter 26

ARIA

When everyone left and Luca and I were alone with Marcella again, he walked over to us and peered down at Marcella in her crib. He looked at her like he wanted to touch her, to hold her, but he didn't allow himself to do so. I stood. "I'm going to the bathroom. Will you watch Marcella?"

Luca nodded slowly but his eyes flickered with worry. Moving was still difficult, so it took a while for me to walk upstairs into our bathroom. *Everything* took longer, and I was washing my hands when I heard Marcella's cries. I hurried out but stopped in the doorway of our bedroom, peering through the gap down at Luca, who was hovering next to the crib.

I wasn't sure how to make him see that he wouldn't hurt her.

"Aria?" he called and I hid behind the door, waiting.

My gut wrenched at Marcella's cries. It took all my willpower not to run for her and cradle her in my arms.

"It's okay," Luca said softly.

I risked another glance downstairs.

Luca still stood over the crib, staring down at it like it was going to kill him. I was on the verge of walking down, of interfering and calming Marcella, when finally he reached down. He had watched me lift her. He hesitated then he lifted her from the crib, supporting her small head with his strong fingers the way I always did it. She looked tiny against his strong

hands. He cradled her in the crook of his arm, then stroked her cheek with his index finger. My heart burst with so much love, it was almost painful.

“Shhh, princess, shhh. Everything is okay.” She quieted, big eyes trying to focus on him. “God, you are so small,” he whispered, his finger brushing over her small hand and tiny fingers.

“See,” I said, walking onto the landing. “You didn’t break her.”

He looked up then frowned. “You set this up.”

“I didn’t set it up. Marcella cries whenever she wants. But I chose not to go to her like I usually would.”

I walked down the stairs slowly, and Luca moved toward me, holding out his free hand to support me. My heart swelled as I put my palm over Luca’s arm holding our baby. “She enjoys being in your arm.” His gaze moved back down to our daughter.

LUCA

Marcella’s cries pitched higher as she flailed in the crib. Aria was still upstairs, but she needed to calm down our daughter.

“Aria?”

She didn’t reply and Marcella kept wailing, her face scrunched up, arms and legs twitching. Fuck. My heart tore from her cries.

Holding my breath, I reached into the crib, carefully slid my hand under Marcella, making sure my fingers supported her head, and I lifted her out. She was so small in my palms. I cradled her in the crook of my arm and ran my thumb along her soft cheek. “Shhh, princess, everything is okay.” She quieted, blinking up.

“See, you didn’t break her,” Aria said as she appeared at the top of the stairs.

I hadn’t and I wouldn’t.

Aria joined us downstairs. I’d never seen her happier than in this moment as she watched me with Marcella. I wrapped my free arm around her, pulling her against my side, and she gave me that gorgeous slow smile. “See, your darkness didn’t rub off on me and it hasn’t rubbed off on her, Luca. Marcella will see you as I see you, as someone who holds her when she needs him to, someone who loves her and protects her.”

“You make me human, Aria,” I said quietly.

Her brows drew together. “Don’t say that. You are human.”

I smiled darkly. “If anyone ever dares to hurt you or Marcella, they won’t see my human side.”

Aria nodded. “Nobody will ever get the chance to hurt us, Luca.”

She was right. I’d move Heaven and earth to guarantee her safety. Being at war with the Outfit would make this harder. I had the Outfit and the Bratva to watch, not to mention local MCs who kept giving my Underbosses trouble in the Southeast. But my biggest concern was becoming the Camorra in Las Vegas.

I had to make sure the Outfit didn’t start working with the Camorra, or things would get messy. Yet as long as Benedetto Falcone kept killing his Underbosses, Dante would regard him as too volatile, and without continuity in his ranks, Benedetto lacked the necessary focus to set his sights beyond his borders. But who could say how long that would last? Remo Falcone had disappeared but I knew he was out there, and one day he’d make himself known in the West. He wouldn’t give me trouble again, not until he’d killed his father and become Capo, but then all bets would be off. He’d sized me up. He was still young and had nothing to lose, but he

forgot I had something worth fighting for. Perhaps his father would take him off my hands and dispose of his son before that.

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chapter 27

ARIA

Luca was tense when he returned late one night six months after Marcella's birth. I watched as he undressed, his movements jerky, eyes worried.

"Luca?" I asked quietly, but he shook his head and lay down beside me completely naked. His need reflected clearly in his eyes. I climbed on top of him, my lips finding his as his hands roamed my back then dipped between my legs.

I quivered on top of him, but I wanted to feel him in me. I scooted down and lowered myself on his erection. My hands against his chest, I began moving my hips as I looked into his eyes. I knew Luca had a lot to deal with at the moment, but he tried to keep the problems away from Marcella and me. This often felt like the only way I could give him comfort.

Later, when I lay in his arms, he returned to being tense. "Luca, please tell me what's bothering you."

"My aunt Flavia contacted me."

I frowned. I didn't remember that name. "Flavia?"

"She was my father's youngest sister, but she ran off with a Camorrista when I was a small boy."

My eyebrows rose. He'd never mentioned her, but given her betrayal I wasn't surprised.

“She lives in Las Vegas, and recently her husband was executed by Falcone because he betrayed the Camorra.”

“And now she wants to come back to New York?”

Luca shook his head. “No. Benedetto Falcone is using her to contact me and convince me to work with him.”

I raised my head. “Work with the Camorra. Didn’t you say Falcone was completely unpredictable and sadistic?”

“He’s probably the only one who makes my father look like a halfway decent human being,” Luca muttered. “And I won’t work with the Camorra. Not as long as it’s under Benedetto Falcone’s rule. But I don’t want him to work with the Outfit.”

“Do you think that’s a possibility?”

“I doubt Dante will see Falcone as a trustworthy ally.”

“So you will refuse him? What will happen to your aunt?”

Luca grimaced, and I could tell he hadn’t told me everything. “She and her daughters will probably be punished.”

I searched his face. “The Camorra doesn’t spare women in any way.”

“They don’t,” Luca said. “Falcone will probably have the girls raped. It’s an effective punishment against women.”

I stiffened, couldn’t help it.

Luca stroked my cheek. “I’m stating facts, love. There is a reason why it’s been a strategy in warfare in the past.”

“How old are the girls, your cousins?”

“Nineteen.” Pause. “And fifteen.”

I jerked out of his grip and slipped out from under the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, my heart pounding in my chest. Fifteen. That’s how old I had been when my father had agreed to my engagement with Luca. I had been a girl, and Luca’s cousin was a child too. I swallowed. Someone’s

child. The idea that something like that could happen to Marcella, it turned my stomach to ice.

Luca sat up and kissed my shoulder before turning my face around to him. His gray eyes searched mine. “Aria, I can’t work with Falcone. I don’t want anything to do with him. He isn’t sane, not even by our standards.”

“Can you promise me that Marcella won’t ever have to fear something like that?” I couldn’t even say the word. Tears burned my eyes.

Luca gripped my arms and pulled me into his lap, his eyes fierce and dark with emotion. “Neither you nor Marcella will ever be hurt, Aria. Never. I will do anything to make sure our territory is a safe place. As long as I am Capo, you are protected, and I don’t care if I have to go there and kill him myself, but right now they are weak.”

I nodded. “If there’s a chance of helping your aunt and cousins without working with Falcone, will you do it?”

Luca considered that. “Maybe. They are women. But that also poses a problem. I don’t like to torture women, so I have no way to question them for their motives.”

LUCA

This was a meeting I wasn’t looking forward to, but Aria wanted me to help my aunt and her daughters, so I had agreed to meet them. At least, that was part of the reason. The other was that the Enforcer of the Camorra had contacted me and offered to kill Falcone and many high-ranking Camorrista in return for taking in the women. Apparently, he’d been given my older cousin Cara as a reward by Falcone, and now he wanted her safe. I didn’t trust the guy, but he had held his promise and killed Benedetto Falcone and

was currently killing more men. Maybe soon the Camorra wouldn't be one of my worries anymore. Remo Falcone was still in hiding with his brothers.

I'd chosen the parking lot in front of the Yonkers power plant for the meeting again. Matteo glanced my way. "I still have a bad feeling about this."

I nodded grimly when finally a car headed our way.

Matteo, Romero and I were in this car, and Orfeo, as well as two of my cousins were in the car behind us.

The car parked about three car lengths from us. I could see a man behind the steering wheel as well as three women in the car with him.

"What the fuck are they waiting for?" Matteo muttered.

One of the car doors opened and a young woman with long dark hair got out. She raised her arms and moved away from the car. A moment later an older woman and a girl got out and held up their hands as well.

"That must be our dear aunt and cousins," Matteo said quietly. "But the fucker behind the wheel seems intent on pissing us off. I'm not sure if he thought that through."

"Oh, he will get out of that car, don't worry," I said, then shoved open the car door and got out, drawing my gun.

The older girl, Cara, looked at me as if I'd risen from Hell, and her younger sister was cowering beside her mother.

Matteo and Romero stepped up to my side.

"Let's go to them," I ordered.

"You think they are trustworthy?" Matteo asked doubtfully.

"No," I muttered. "But they aren't a danger to us." Turning to Romero, I added. "You stay back and have our backs." He gave a nod, his eyes directed at the car. Then I gave a sign to my other men in the other car.

Matteo and I moved closer to the three women, but we stopped a good distance away.

“Your driver needs to get out,” I ordered, nodding toward the cowardly fucker still hiding in the car. What kind of man let women and girls get out into the firing line while he stayed back?

My cousin Cara turned around to the coward and waved at him. He didn’t move.

“If he doesn’t get out soon, I’ll get him out myself and he won’t like that,” Matteo muttered.

Finally, the man got out with his hands raised above his head and Orfeo was on him at once, twisting his arms behind his back. The pussy actually cried out from pain. If Orfeo’s handling already got that reaction from him, he wouldn’t like the conversation I and Matteo would have with him later. Orfeo silenced him with a hard hit against the back of the head and dragged the coward away.

The younger girl started crying and Cara took her hand, but that only made the girl cry harder.

Cara straightened her shoulders and looked at me. “I’m Cara. I’m your cousin.”

“We know exactly who you are,” Matteo said sharply.

I motioned for them to come closer. After a moment of hesitation, Cara went first then her mother and sister followed. “Wait,” I told them as we stopped in front of the car. “We will check you for weapons.”

Matteo went over to our aunt, and I turned to the younger girl and reached for her but she flinched away, her eyes wide and terror-filled. “Talia,” her sister crooned. “He won’t hurt you.”

“I will feel your legs and back for weapons. If you prefer not to have my hands on your front, you can lift your shirt, but I need to make sure you

aren’t bringing weapons,” I told her firmly.

I touched her shoulders and could feel her shaking under my touch. Matteo sent me a look. I quickly felt her back then moved on to her calves and thighs. I decided against feeling her upper thighs. “Do you prefer to lift your shirt?”

I was a heartless bastard, but even I didn’t like forcing a girl who had obviously been through a lot of shit to lift her shirt, Still, I had to make sure this wasn’t a trap, and even innocent girls could be manipulated into becoming weapons. With shaking fingers, she lifted her T-shirt, revealing bare skin and a plain black bra but no weapons. I nodded and she quickly moved it back down. “You can get into the car. You, Cara, will sit in the front with me, and Matteo will sit with your mother and sister in the back.”

We would be taking them into the Sphere for now while Orfeo pressed information out of the man.

Of course, Aria insisted that we take them in for a few days until we found a safe place for them to live. I didn’t mention that the main reason for helping them was because I needed Growl, the former Enforcer of the Camorra at my side, in case it came to war with the Camorra one day.

I thought I’d run into protest from my aunts Egidia and Criminella, but they were surprisingly glad to have their sister back. Since I’d disposed of my scheming uncle things had definitely gone smoother.

While Talia and Cara lived in the mansion, Marcella stayed in New York and the few times Aria visited my cousins while they stayed in the Hamptons, she left our daughter with Romero and Lily. Hiding Marcella’s existence was crucial. I had seen how Dante had used Aria against me. I

didn’t want to consider what my enemies would do if they knew about Marcella.

When I saw Growl for the first time, my instincts told me to kill him despite our deal. He had been the Enforcer of the Camorra for many years. He was Benedetto Falcone’s son, Remo’s half-brother, all things that spoke against him. He was bound to be as twisted as them but I was a man of honor and had given him my word. He had upheld his part, had weakened the Camorra. He would have to prove himself over the next few months.

In April, three months after Growl’s arrival, Matteo and I sat in the living area of the penthouse, discussing the newest developments in Las Vegas.

“They will spend years fighting over power. The Camorra is in shambles, if and when Remo Falcone ever reaches for power, if he ever becomes Capo, he’ll be ruling over ruins,” he said.

I hoped he was right. I had done everything in my power to weaken the Camorra, but I still remembered our encounter with Remo Falcone and the look in his eyes. He would seize power eventually.

My phone vibrated in my pants and I pulled it out and picked up. “Orazio?”

His reports had become less frequent. Dante kept a short leash on all of his soldiers.

“Has Fabiano Scuderi showed up in New York?”

I sat up. “Fabiano? Why? What happened?”

Matteo raised his eyebrows.

“Rocco Scuderi said his son defected, ran off, and there’s no trace of him. Dante is looking for him.”

Dante would kill him for defecting. “He hasn’t showed up.”

“He’s been gone for two weeks now.”

“Are you sure he ran and Scuderi didn’t dispose of him? After all, he got a new heir with his child-bride.”

Orazio was silent. “I don’t know. Scuderi is an asshole. Dante should have removed him a long time ago but as long as Fiore Cavallaro lives, Dante won’t do it. He respects his father too much and wouldn’t dispose of the Consigliere he chose.”

Disapproval was clear in his voice. Orazio didn’t like how things were handled in the Outfit, but that wasn’t why he worked with us. That was something personal, something to do with his father.

“Dante suspects there’s a mole in the Outfit.”

“When we interfered in his gun delivery to the fucking MC in Pittsburgh, he probably got suspicious.” Dante was using guerilla tactics to weaken me, supporting MCs in my territory so they messed with my business.

“Maybe. I’m not sure how much longer I will be safe.”

I’d feared his spy work would eventually come to an end. “Come to New York. I will induct you officially and when my soldiers have worked with you for a bit, you’ll become Underboss in Boston.”

Stunned silence. “You will make me Underboss.”

“Yes,” I said. The Underboss of Boston was about to retire and had only daughters, and it would piss off Dante to no end if I made his brother-in-law my Underboss. We discussed a few more details of his induction to the Famiglia before I hung up and sighed. “Fabiano disappeared.”

Matteo grimaced. “That boy was loyal. I doubt he defected from the Outfit.”

“Agreed.” That left only one conclusion. Scuderi had gotten rid of him. “Fuck.”

“We can’t tell our wives. They will lose their minds.”

“They won’t find out. They have no way of contacting their brother and no way to find out what happens in Chicago.”

Aria and I had agreed not to keep secrets from each other anymore, but it was a promise I couldn’t keep. Aria would blame herself if she found out her brother was dead. She’d be broken and never forgive herself. It was a secret I had to keep to protect her.

Matteo and I fell silent when Aria came down the stairs with Marcella on her arms, Gianna a few steps behind her. Marcella was wiggling wildly, thick black hair all over the place.

Aria laughed and put Marcella down on the ground. Eager blue eyes zeroed in on me and Marcella crawled toward me, her diaper-clad bum bobbing up and down. I bent forward and held out my palms. She crawled faster, making high-pitched giggling noises. The second she reached me I grabbed her and rose to my feet, propelling her up over my head like a rocket. She screeched happily and I swung her around toward Matteo’s outstretched arms, who threw her into the air and caught her again.

Aria laughed, a happy, relaxed sound. I couldn’t tell her about Fabiano. We had our own family now. Matteo blew a raspberry against Marcella’s belly and her giggling became even wilder. I’d have never thought that I could love anyone’s laughter as much as Aria’s, but Marcella’s brought me the same sense of fulfillment. I took Marcella again and held her up against my chest. Her small hand pressed against my mouth, and she grinned a huge, toothless smile as I kissed her palm.

Most of my life I’d thought there was no better sound than the screams of agony from my enemies. What a fucking fool I’d been.

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chapter 28

Six years later, ARIA

“No!” Amo screamed, stamping his foot. He picked up his shoes and threw them across the room. He was already tall for three and could throw remarkably far for a young child.

“We won’t go outside if you don’t put on shoes,” I said, stifling a sigh.

He was boisterous, strong-willed and hotheaded. He was a small version of Luca, black hair, gray eyes, with hints of Matteo’s temper.

“Pick up your shoes and put them on.”

Amo shook his head at me, crossing his arms over his small chest. “No!”

“Amo.” Luca’s voice was firm.

Amo’s gaze flitted toward Luca, who stood in the doorway, and his eyes widened but then he jutted his chin out. He was in his defiant phase. So far he’d never been defiant toward Luca though. “No,” he said.

Luca walked in. “What did you say?”

Amo glared at the floor. “No.” Hesitation swung in his voice.

My eyes darted between Luca and Amo. I knew Amo would follow in Luca’s footsteps. He would become Capo one day. He would become a Made Man long before he was of age. He would have to be strong for the tasks ahead, hardened, and he would have to learn respect. Luca stopped in front of our son. He’d not once raised his hand against Amo or Marcella,

never hurt them in any other way, and he would never do so, and usually they obeyed anyway.

Luca crouched down, expression unrelenting. “Look at me,” he ordered, and Amo raised his eyes to his father’s. Luca pointed at the shoes. “You will pick them up and you will put them on. Understood, Amo?” His voice held authority and Amo nodded slowly, but his expression was still defiant as he trudged toward the shoes. Yet he got down on his butt and slipped the shoes on.

Luca shook his head. I touched his arm. “The phase will pass,” I assured him.

He smiled wryly. “He is too much like Matteo. I will need the patience of a saint.”

Amo grew frustrated when he didn’t manage to bind his shoes, and angry tears gathered in his gray eyes. I could tell he wanted to throw his shoes again.

Luca walked over and got down on his haunches, then showed Amo how to do it. Amo smiled when he managed to do it himself. “Remember, Amo, no crying when someone could see you. Not even in anger or frustration,” Luca said quietly but firmly. “It’s okay to cry when you are alone with your mother or me.”

Amo nodded and blinked a few times. Luca stood and held out his hand. “Let’s check out your uncle’s new bike. It’s even faster than his last.”

Amo took Luca’s hand and beamed up at his father.

They looked so much alike, it filled my heart with ridiculous happiness. Luca had been worried he’d be too hard on a son, especially if he looked like him, but he needn’t have worried. He was strict toward Amo but never cruel. He wasn’t anything like his father.

LUCA

After we'd inspected Matteo's new bike, Amo dashed off again, probably to bug his sister.

"I'm starving," Matteo said. "Why don't we go in and check if your little monsters left us any leftovers."

We walked back up the driveway and entered the mansion. With her six years, Marcella looked remarkably like her mother, except for the black hair. She raced toward me the moment I entered, Amo hot on her heels.

She hugged my middle, peering up at me with a pout. "Amo hit me!"

My eyes flew toward my son. Amo glared at his sister. "She hit me first!"

"Because you took my doll and ripped its head off."

I narrowed my eyes at my son. "You don't ever raise your hand against your sister, understood?"

He gave a reluctant nod. I caught Marcella poking her tongue out at him and nudged her chin up with my finger. I was often too lenient with her, but it was hard to be strict when she looked at me with her mother's eyes and face. "And you won't hit your brother again."

She flushed. "Okay."

I turned back to Amo, who looked triumphantly at his sister. "Why did you rip the doll's head off?"

His face scrunched up in disgust. "Marci made kissy noises and told me to kiss it."

Matteo leaned in the doorway, chuckling.

"Why don't you torture your uncle?" I suggested.

Amo didn’t need to be told twice, of course. With a battle cry, he stormed toward Matteo and latched on to his leg like a spider monkey. Marcella was close behind and started tugging at Matteo’s arm, trying to bring him to his knees.

“Mercy,” he moaned and went down. I rolled my eyes at his theatrical performance but my kids loved it. Matteo began tickling them and Amo dashed away, out of reach and hid behind me. I chuckled and tousled his hair. He pressed up to my leg. It seemed ridiculous that I’d ever thought I would be cruel to a son. I was stricter with him and I had to harden him, but I would never hurt him like our father had hurt Matteo and me.

Matteo got Marcella and began tickling her. “Help!” she called between laughs. Amo released me and flung himself back at Matteo to help his sister. My smile fell the second Amo reached for Matteo’s gun in the holster at his waist.

“No,” I growled sharply, and he snatched his hand back at once. Both Marcella and him watched me wide-eyed.

Matteo cleared his throat and pointed at his holster. “You won’t ever touch a gun without your father’s or my permission.”

They both nodded but still threw glances my way. Sighing, I walked over to them and tousled their hair, glad when they relaxed, my sharp tone forgotten. “Why don’t you find your mother?”

With a nod and a smile, they rushed off.

“I wouldn’t have let him touch my gun,” Matteo assured me as I straightened.

“I know,” I said. Eventually, Amo would learn to handle guns and knives, but under our supervision and not at three years old.

My cell rang. I didn’t recognize the number. I raised the phone to my ear. “Yes?”

“Luca,” said a male voice. “It’s been a while. It’s Fabiano.”

I almost dropped the fucking phone. “Fabiano Scuderi?” I motioned for Matteo to follow me outside and turned the speakerphone on.

“I am calling you in my Capo’s name.”

Matteo’s eyebrows shot up.

“Your Capo?” I repeated, still trying to process the news that this was Fabiano.

“Remo Falcone. I’m sure you’ve heard of him.” A hint of amusement rang in his voice.

I heard about him all right. Ever since he took over Las Vegas and most of the West, he was a nagging headache.

“You contacted us for negotiations regarding delivery routes for your drugs. I am his Enforcer, and I would like to come to New York for negotiations in Remo’s stead.”

Matteo shot me a look and mouthed *Enforcer*. It had been weeks since I’d sent Remo a message through a middleman. The Outfit was intercepting our drug deliveries, and Remo’s territory was our best option to find new delivery routes. I didn’t trust Remo one bit, but drugs were our main business and I needed to make decisions that helped the Famiglia despite my personal feelings toward Remo. Since working with Dante was out of the question that left only the fucking Camorra, even if I hated the thought.

“I did,” I said carefully.

“We have a common enemy, Luca, and that’s the Outfit. I think we have a lot to talk about.”

I didn’t like his tone but agreed to a meeting in three days, then hung up.

“He’s not dead,” Matteo muttered. “Our wives will be ecstatic to see him again.”

“He is Enforcer of the Camorra, Matteo.”

“So you won’t tell Aria?”

I considered my options. If I didn’t tell Aria that her brother came to New York, she’d be heartbroken, but him being Remo’s man, she would be heartbroken seeing him too. “How could we miss this?” I muttered.

“We have enough to do with the fucking Outfit, the Bratva and those fucking MCs. It’s not like we had spare time to worry about the fucking Camorra. They never breached our territory or gave us trouble.”

I nodded, but still. If Remo had managed to keep Fabiano’s existence a secret for so long, that meant his men were loyal to the bone and that he had iron control of his city. I knew Nino Falcone was his second in command, and they had been the ones I’d heard about, but they worked quietly.

“What do you think is his true motivation for the visit?” Matteo asked eventually.

I wasn’t sure. Remo was unpredictable. His appearance in New York six years ago had proven that. “We will find out.”

Aria was practically bouncing with nerves beside me. Growl shook his head, grimacing. His eyes sought mine. Aria still thought she’d be united with the brother she remembered, but he wouldn’t be that boy. Growl, Matteo and I knew it. Growl had been the Camorra’s Enforcer for years and from what he’d told us, Fabiano must have changed into someone without mercy to become Remo’s Enforcer.

I tensed when the door opened and a tall, muscled man with short blond hair and blue eyes stepped in. The last time I’d seen him, he’d had trouble hiding his emotions. He’d gotten past that. His cold scrutiny tightened my

muscles. Growl touched his gun, hatred written all across his face when Fabiano's eyes settled on him.

Aria rushed forward and I wasn't quick enough to stop her.

Fabiano narrowed his eyes and tensed when she threw her arms around him. I drew my gun, aiming it straight at his head, and so did Growl and Matteo.

His hand curled around Aria's neck as she clung to him, and he smirked. I should have killed him seven years ago when he still was a boy. He held her neck in a way that would allow him to break it easily. Aria peered up, and finally realization set in. This wasn't her brother anymore.

"No need for drawn weapons," Fabiano drawled in a self-assured tone. "I haven't traveled all the way here to hurt my sister."

He lowered his hand, and I stepped forward and pulled Aria away from him.

"My God," she whispered. "What happened to you?"

"You, Gianna, and Liliana happened."

Aria was close to tears beside me. "I don't understand."

"After Liliana ran off as well, Father decided that something must be wrong with all of us. That perhaps Mother's blood running through our veins was the problem. He thought I was another mistake in the making. He tried to beat it out of me. Maybe he thought if I bled often enough, I'd be rid of any trace of that weakness. The moment his whore of a second wife gave birth to a boy, he decided I was no longer of use. He ordered one of his men to kill me. The man took pity on me and drove me to some shithole in Kansas City so the Bratva could kill me instead. I had twenty dollars and a knife. And I put that knife to good use."

I tightened my hold on Aria because she made a move as if to go closer to him. "We didn't want to hurt you. We just wanted to save Liliana from a

horrible marriage. We didn't think you'd need saving. You were a boy. You were on your way to becoming a soldier for the Outfit. We would have saved you if you'd asked."

"I saved myself."

"You could still … leave Las Vegas," Aria said carefully.

I shot her a look. Was she blind to the truth? Fabiano was a loyal man, but his loyalties lay with Remo Falcone. I wondered how he'd done it. How had Remo, that twisted teenager from many years ago, gained so many loyal followers? How had he managed to unite all the Underbosses of the West? The Camorra was as strong as they had been in the past, and it was a fucking problem.

Fabiano laughed. "Are you suggesting I'll leave the Camorra and join the Famiglia?"

"It's an option."

No, it wasn't. And I wouldn't have taken him in, not anymore.

Fabiano challenged me with his eyes. "Is she Capo or you? I came here to talk to the man leading the show, but now I think it might be a woman after all."

Provocation was his tactic, like it had been that of Remo in the past. "She is your sister. She does the talking because I allowed her to do so. Don't worry, Fabi—if I had anything to say to you, I'd say it."

"We are not your enemy, Fabi," Aria said.

We were. If it wasn't for Aria, I would have ended Fabiano in this moment.

"I'm a member of the Camorra. You *are* my enemies. I have a message from Remo for you." He met my gaze and his twisted grin made my blood boil. "You have nothing to offer Remo or the Camorra, unless perhaps you send him your wife for a joy ride."

I lunged at him, wanting to crush his fucking throat, but Aria stepped in the way and I had to jerk to a stop or I would have barreled into her. “Calm down, Luca,” Aria begged, her eyes full of despair.

I shook with suppressed rage as I glared at Fabiano. I would kill him one day.

Fabiano bowed mockingly. “I assume that’s all.”

“Don’t you want to know how Lily and Gianna are doing?” Aria asked hopefully. That she didn’t mention Marcella and Amo told me that despite her hope, she knew her brother was a threat and not family.

“They mean nothing to me. The day you left for your pampered life in New York, you ceased existing for me.”

Fabiano turned around and left, and I let him. Let him because of Aria, and because I couldn’t fucking risk war with the Camorra at the moment.

Matteo twisted his knife, looking like he wanted to go after Fabiano and slice his throat.

Aria turned to face me with shock-widened eyes. “What happened to him?”

“The Camorra,” Growl rasped. “And Remo fucking Falcone. I met him only a few times, but even as a boy my half-brother was…” He shook his head. “Can’t find the right word.”

“Yeah,” Matteo said.

Aria walked past me and sank down on the sofa, her back to us.

I motioned for my brother and Growl to leave us alone. When they were out, I touched Aria’s shoulder. She peered up at me, unshed tears in her eyes. She leaned her cheek against my hand on her shoulder.

Then she held up a piece of paper. I frowned.

“Fabiano put it in my pocket asking for a meeting tonight.” She swallowed. “Alone.”

“You won’t go.”

She stood and lifted her chin. “I will go. I need to give him one last chance.”

“Aria, he won’t take it. You know why he wants you alone.”

She looked away. “You don’t know that. He is my brother. Maybe he needs to talk to me alone.” But I could see the doubt in her expression.

“Let’s go home,” I said. “And tonight we’ll meet him together.”

She nodded.

When we stepped into our penthouse, Lily, heavily pregnant, sat on the couch with Amo and Marcella. Aria walked over to our children and hugged them tightly and kissed the top of their heads. Lily frowned, gaze questioning. I wouldn’t be the one to tell a woman due any day now that her brother was a member of the Camorra, and Aria didn’t seem too eager sharing that piece of information either.

“Mom, I can do a handstand!” Marcella said proudly.

Amo nodded enthusiastically.

“Then let’s see,” I encouraged her.

Marcella got up. “You have to catch my feet, Dad.”

“I will.” She stepped close and then she fell forward. With her momentum she would have fallen over, but I caught her feet.

Aria clapped. I lifted Marcella off the ground by her legs and she began giggling when I swung her back and forth. Amo stormed toward me. “Me too!”

I put Marcella down and gripped Amo, letting him hang head down as well.

Aria laughed, shaking her head. “Your head is turning red, Amo.”

I raised Amo higher so I could see his face, and he grinned widely. “Higher!”

I complied but when his head turned too red, I set him down.

“Now go wash your hands,” Aria said, and Marcella and Amo dashed off toward the bathroom.

“Can you watch them tonight as well?” I asked.

Liliana glanced between Aria and me. “Did something happen?”

Aria shook her head. “No. Luca and I only need some time to ourselves.”

“Okay,” Liliana said slowly. “Romero picks me up in thirty minutes. We can take Marcella and Amo home with us and bring them back tomorrow around lunch?”

“Thank you,” Aria said, hugging her sister.

It was almost two in the morning when we got into our car and headed toward the meeting point Fabiano had mentioned in his letter. Aria was quiet beside me. I reached for her hand and she gave me a grateful smile.

She looked resolved, not broken-hearted as I’d feared. She fumbled with a bracelet on her left wrist. It was the first time I’d seen it on her. Usually she only wore the bracelet I had given her. I parked in a side street and turned to Aria. She noticed my gaze on her wrist. “It was my mother’s. I want to give it to Fabiano.”

“Aria, I know you think you can still appeal to his heart, but trust me when I say that as Enforcer of the Camorra, he can’t allow himself a soft heart.”

She gave me a strange smile. “I am surrounded by men like him. They are my family. I am married to one.”

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

“Or are you saying that Fabiano has done worse than you?”

I wasn’t sure what Fabiano had or hadn’t done, but I had committed pretty much any crime imaginable. There was only one difference between the Famiglia and the Camorra, and it was the one crime I wasn’t guilty of.

“They don’t spare women, Aria.”

She swallowed audibly. “I know. But I have to believe that there is good in him.” She touched my chest where my Famiglia tattoo was. “I got through to you. Perhaps I can get through to him.”

If anyone could do it, then it was Aria. She had won my heart after all.

It had begun snowing when we got out of the car. I drew my Beretta, listening for suspicious noises, but it was quiet except for the sound of traffic in the distance.

Aria shivered. “Don’t kill him. Please.”

I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t something I could promise. If he made a wrong move, I’d end him before he could harm Aria.

“Don’t mention Marcella or Amo,” I warned.

She scowled. “Luca, I love my brother, but I would walk through fire for my children and you. I would never risk their safety. We’ve fought so hard to keep them a secret from our enemies. I won’t put that on the line for Fabiano or anyone.”

I wasn’t sure how much longer we could keep them a secret. They were growing older. We’d pulled back from the public for them, and I had threatened a few journalists who thought they could write something about us. Nothing had gone public. Dante had done the same and without Orazio as a spy, I didn’t know anything about his children.

I gave Aria a nod and signaled her to walk ahead. I raised my gun but stayed back. I spotted Fabiano as we turned the corner. He was leaning against the wall, looking fucking relaxed.

His eyes zeroed in on Aria but he didn’t notice me. I aimed at his head.

“Hello, Fabi,” Aria greeted him and showed him his letter. “You said you wanted to talk to me alone because you needed my help?”

He stepped closer with a look on his face that I didn’t like one fucking bit. Aria let him come much closer than we’d agreed on. The hand with his gun still hung limply at his side though.

His eyes turned to me and he smirked as he spotted me.

“Finally being sensible, Aria,” he said, and there was a flicker of something on his face I couldn’t place.

“I know a thing or two about mob life.” She tilted her head up at him. “Aren’t you worried for your life?”

“Why would I be?”

He looked like a man who had faced death on many occasions and who didn’t fear it. He had nothing to lose, and it made him a dangerous enemy.

Aria unfastened the bracelet and held it out to him. “It was Mother’s. She gave it to me shortly before her death. I want you to have it.”

“Why?” he muttered, glaring down at the bracelet, then up at Aria.

“Because I want you to remember.”

“The family that abandoned me?”

“No, the boy you used to be and the man you can still become.”

Aria was too good for this world even after years as my wife.

“Who says I want to remember?” He leaned down to Aria, his face too close to hers, and I released the safety on my Beretta.

Fabiano straightened. “You want me to be a better man. Why don’t you start with the man who’s pointing a gun at my head?”

Aria pushed the bracelet against his chest and he took it.

“Perhaps one day you’ll find someone who will love you despite what you’ve become, and she will make you want to be better.” She finally

stepped away. “Goodbye, Fabiano. Luca wants you to know that next time you come to New York, you will pay with your life.”

I didn’t lower my gun as Aria headed toward me, but Fabiano made no move to follow. He was staring down at the bracelet. He reminded me of myself when I was younger, before Aria. Without her, I’d be a different man today. Perhaps I’d have become like my father.

Aria arrived at my side and I wrapped an arm around her before I led her away. I considered sending someone out to kill Fabiano but decided against it. War with the Camorra was the last thing I needed at the moment.

Aria was silent during the drive home, and she still hadn’t said anything when we stepped into our penthouse in the early morning. I gave her the time she needed to face reality. When we finally settled in bed, Aria stretched out on her back, and me on my side facing her, I broke the silence. “Will you be okay? Don’t blame yourself. Fabiano made his choices, not you.”

I was worried Aria would do something crazy for her brother again.

Her blue eyes were solemn. “I’m okay,” she said. “*I am*, honestly. Fabiano is a grown man. He is Enforcer of the Camorra. He isn’t the boy I knew. I can’t protect him anymore and it’s not my job. You and Marcella and Amo are my priority. You are the ones I need to take care of.”

I could tell she meant it, but deep down she’d always hope Fabiano would eventually become human again. Maybe she’d be proven right. She had softened my cruel heart; who was to say the same wouldn’t happen with Fabiano?

I stroked her cheek and her eyelids fluttered. She looked tense and tired, and yet fucking gorgeous.

"Turn around, *principessa*," I ordered, and she rolled onto her stomach without protest. I knelt beside her on the bed and ran my hands over her soft skin, massaging away her tension. She let out a soft sigh, her body turning slack. My eyes trailed down her spine to her perfect ass. I squeezed the round globes, then bit down on the soft flesh lightly before I soothed the spot with my tongue. Aria trembled, and moaned softly. I kneaded her ass cheeks as I trailed open-mouthed kisses up her spine.

I brushed her hair away and nibbled on the crook of her neck lightly as my fingers dipped between her folds, finding her dripping wet. She turned her head to the side, biting her lower lip, and I entered her slowly. She moaned, eyes closing in pleasure. I watched her face as I fingered her. She arched her ass in rhythm with my thrusts, driving my fingers deeper.

When my cock was painfully hard, I moved my body over hers and slid my tip in, savoring her heat for a moment before I filled her completely. Her back arched against my chest. I propped my elbows up, caging her in and began to thrust into her slowly at first, then faster and harder. I kissed her throat, then bit down, marking her, and her walls clamped down on me as she cried out her release. I slowed my thrusts, waiting for her to catch her breath before I picked up my pace again. We had the penthouse to ourselves tonight, so I wanted to make her scream as often as possible.

I wedged my hand below her body, rubbing her clit as I slammed harder into her. Aria came again, shuddering and gasping, and when my own release gripped me, she was swept up again and came a third time.

I stayed on top of her, careful to keep off most of my weight as I kissed her neck and throat, then claimed her mouth for a kiss.

“You still mark me,” she said with a hint of amusement, rolling on to her back. “Do you really think there’s anyone out there who doesn’t know that I’m yours?”

I stroked the faint bruise on her throat. “You are mine,” I said in a low voice. “And it’s not them I’m reminding, it’s myself, because even after eleven years sometimes it still seems impossible that I have you, that I love you and that you love me.”

Aria’s fingers trailed down to my shoulder blade with the tattoo, her eyes warm and fierce. “I’ll go wherever you go no matter how dark the path.”

I grasped her wrist with the bracelet I’d given her many years ago and brought it to my lips, kissing it. “Even in the darkest hour, you are my light.”

THE END

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BORN IN BLOOD MAFIA CHRONICLES

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about the author

Cora Reilly is the author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. Before she found her passion in romance books, she was a traditionally published author of young adult literature.

Cora lives in Germany with a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

Despite her law degree, Cora prefers to talk books to laws any day.

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